

## **REDEFINING MANHOOD: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO MASCULINITY AND MENTAL HEALTH**

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### **Abstract**

"Boys don't cry"—a phrase representative of traditional masculinity—serves as a starting point for this research, where we investigate the profound impact of gender norms on mental health, emotional expression, and psychological well-being. This study explores the relationship between masculinity and mental health by looking at how psychological resilience, emotional well-being, and access to mental health support are affected by traditional gender norms. The concept of masculinity is examined philosophically from the perspectives of gender studies, metaphysics, ethics, and social philosophy. Our study involves underlying structures, norms, and implications of this phenomenon. The study traces the evolution of men's emotional perceptions through a philosophical framework while discussing gender differences and the social norms that have historically shaped these differences. Rethinking emotional vulnerability in men from an existentialist viewpoint. The study focuses on three toxic traits: emotional suppression, aggression, and aversion to vulnerability. Thus, the existing norms contribute to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide among men. It describes the influence in male relationships on mental health outcomes, the restrictions on emotional intimacy in friendships attributable to masculine norms, isolation, and negative behavioural reinforcement within peer groups. The research also examines whether individuals, who are deeply socialized into these structures, ought to be held morally accountable for entrenching toxic masculinity and emphasizes the necessity of awareness and resistance toward such norms. Toxic masculinity harms others (violence, misogyny) and the self (emotional repression, mental health issues). They discuss the moral responsibility of correcting this damage, especially when it is deeply rooted within the established social structures. Feminist

theorists' critique toxic masculinity as a reflection of patriarchal values but also in the proposal that it somehow 'harms not just women but men' too, in constructing a role of masculinity that is restraining. It argues that men have equally suffered under rigid gender expectations, which make it exceedingly difficult for them to express vulnerability or seek emotional support. In addition to offering practical insights for educators, therapists, and legislators seeking to undermine damaging male norms and create a more just society, this study adds findings to the larger conversation on gender roles, mental health, and social ethics.

*Keywords:* Masculinity, Toxic, Gender Norms, Social Norms, Existentialism, Mental Health, Resilience, Social Ethics, Emotional Vulnerability, Patriarchy, Feminism.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MASCULINITY GENDER

is everywhere, and it affects all of us — that includes men. The ancient Chinese world believed that the interlocking building blocks of the universe were Yin (the feminine) and Yang (masculine). Yin corresponds to qualities identified as feminine-receptivity, emotion, or intuition, and the yang as characteristics associated with masculine-action, logic, and assertiveness. Each one cannot live independently, but a true harmonious coexistence is achieved with its balanced presence. From a patriarchal point of view, men have been the default setting—the rational, the normal—so it is unsurprising that it's taken a while for us to recognise

masculinity as part of gender and start seeing men as having a gender too. Whitehead and Barrett explain that: “Masculinities are those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisational locations, which are commonly associated with men, thus culturally defined as not feminine.” The yin-yang philosophy reminds us that neither gender holds intrinsic dominance over the other but instead exists in an interdependent relationship. The idea of ‘masculinity’ is not fixed or universally the same; it is not biological, tucked away on the Y chromosome, or locked in eager cells that get unlocked at puberty when testosterone floods the system. Rather, what we understand to be masculinity differs across cultures and historical time periods and can vary even

within a given culture or society. The masculine experience in the present-day United States is very different from what it was 150 years ago. And within any single culture, there are countless masculinities corresponding to the diverse cultural peoples who constitute it. To treat masculinity as if it referred to some coherent, uniform essence implicitly places one form of ‘being a man’ at the head of the evolutionary march, consigning all others to inferior status.

If gender varies across cultures, over historical time, among men within any one culture, and over the life course, can we really speak of masculinity as though it was a constant, universal essence, common to all men? If not, gender must be understood as fluid and dynamic interplay of meanings and actions informed by cultural, social, and personal contexts. There is empirical evidence pointing to the additive construct of the hegemonic masculinity frameworks that glorifies and rewards physical aggressiveness, competitiveness, and achievement attitudes and behaviours within men. However, an imbalance of yang without the grounding of yin—qualities like emotional openness, empathy, and receptivity—can lead to the rigidity often seen in toxic masculinity.

Connell defines the difference stating: “A traditional masculinity (often understood as patriarchal and in some cases violent) is contrasted with a modern masculinity (often understood as more expressive, egalitarian and peaceable)”. Different from that, gender must be understood as a fluid and dynamic interplay of meanings and actions informed by cultural, social, and personal contexts. There exists a strong empirical basis suggesting an additive construct of masculinity culture, which glorifies and rewards physical aggressiveness, competitiveness, and achievement attitudes and behaviours among men. Masculine metaphysics basically sees the world as ‘being-there’, waiting for us to discover it and break it down into bits and pieces that can then be, in theory, put back together in order to facilitate an understanding of the whole. Unique to masculine metaphysics is a kind of tendency towards rigidity which could in theory be limiting to one’s capacity to adaptively update their framework, as well as a potentially unwarranted expectation that the world ought to consistently conform to some formula dreamt up by the mind of man.

When discussing masculinity, the terms toxic and traditional masculinity come up often defined by 3 main traits:

a. Toughness: Men need to be forceful, battling and emotionally unaffected.

b. Anti-Femininity: Men are discouraged from femininity caught in domestic roles, seeking out help, and displaying a range of emotions.

c. Power: A man is only good if he has money, influence, and authority.

Especially, anti-femininity and homophobia are central to all that traditional masculinity is about. A study in the Journal of School of Psychology uses the following definition to explain toxic masculinity: “the constellation of socially regressive [masculine] traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence.” Overemphasizing and prioritizing these traits can cause someone to try fulfil these expectations, only to develop a harmful imbalance. The term “toxic masculinity” is used to describe aggressive exaggerations of masculine attributes that most cultures have accepted as glorious. For instance, one instance of this is saying to someone who is showing emotions to “man up”, to suppress that emotion. This is just an instance of a way some people see emotion or vulnerability as ‘unmanly.’ This further leads to another common example with the saying “boys will

be boys,” which is easy to use to excuse boisterous, aggressive, or otherwise damaging behaviour in young men, instead of explaining them about accountability and taking responsibility for their actions. Such expressions point to how males have been perceived through cultural and societal norms throughout history. Yet, there are key challenges with these perspectives that normalize and romanticize masculinity, which, in turn, create an even more toxic mindset around these behaviours.

Toxic masculinity is harmful because it limits an individual's personal development and the overall understanding of masculinity. Such limitations can create internal conflict in the person and in their relationships with others. Some theories indicate that toxic masculinity plays a role in physical health. Toxic masculinity may prevent some men from seeking out help for possible health issues and other potential problems. These three components are, by nature, extremely entangled when expressing emotion:

a. Neurophysiological substrate: It involves responses at autonomic and endocrine levels, for instance, activation of the sympathetic nervous system and release of

epinephrine in the act of fighting or running, to cite just two examples.

b. Motor/behavioural response: Emotions make themselves known through facial expressions, tone of voice, body posture—as well as behaviours such as striking out at someone or giving them a hug.

c. Cognitive/affective component: This constitutes the ability to consciously perceive an emotion subjectively and describe it.

In the socialization of masculinity, boys and men are encouraged to reject or avoid anything stereotypically feminine, to be tough and aggressive, suppress emotions (other than anger), distance themselves emotionally and physically from other men, and strive toward competition, success and power. It reflects the traditional toxic masculine values which, according to them, make a male not a real man unless he does not have a sufficient display of such characteristics. What one believes to be the characteristics that men, as set forth by the norms, must show to fulfill the male gender role is what is referred to as dominant masculinity ideology. The terms dominant masculinity or hegemonic masculinity are used to expand and refine the concept of traditional masculinity, underlining that within a society where there is symbolic and material power,

masculinity carries within it both symbolic and material power.

Michael Kimmel, an American sociologist and feminist specializing in gender studies, has written about manhood in America. Kimmel argues that in 19th-century America, masculinity was defined and reinforced through demonstrating masculine worth and fulfilling family responsibilities, shaping the political sphere, workplace, family dynamics, and whole society. Many feminists view men's studies as a threat to already scarce funding dedicated to women's studies. Timothy Laurie and Anna Hickey-Moody insist that "[any] atomisation of masculinity studies as distinct from gender studies, feminist inquiry or queer studies must be understood as provisional and hazardous rather than as the result of absolute differences in the phenomena being investigated or expertise required". Feminist legal theorists have paid mild attention to whether men could embrace feminist objectives in the "Can men be feminists?" question. Many feminists are unwilling to hear men's perspectives on issues such as men's mental health and the abuse that most men face in their lifetime because these issues most of the time are being brought to the floor to address due to women having the courage to

speak out on what they go through in life due to men/patriarchal systems. Men's responses to this aren't personal accounts either, which takes away the emotional side of the information, often making it harder for many women to believe. A column in an online newspaper downright reject adding men's mental health into feminist issues, it says, "It is not the feminist movement's job to fight for your issues — it is yours. Women are raised to cater to their own oppressor's needs, so it is no surprise that there is a push for feminists to. It is also not the feminist movement's job to convince men they should support it." Feminism can free men from feelings of inadequacy, failure, and anger.

Masculinity is far from a static or universal thing. It is fluid and dynamic, changing through time, changing from culture to culture, from social group to social group, and from the experience of one individual to another. The toughness, anti-femininity, and power-oriented aspects of traditional and toxic masculinity highlights deeply rooted cultural expectations, which generally do not support the openness of feelings and personal development. Such ideals work within fixed structures that invert sensitivity and emphasize dominance over submission, creating the

foundation upon which oppressive behaviour and attitudes rest.

Overlaying the philosophical framework of masculinity, we reveal the undercurrents in these ideologies and the reflection of who men are and how they play their role in society. Addressing toxic masculinity is not just about challenging those norms, but also putting forward a more inclusive and expansive definition of what it means to be a man. Promoting emotional release, rethinking success and power, and dismantling rigid gender binaries are essential ways to foster healthier masculinities that promote individual well-being and social harmony.

### **THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER NORMS AND EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION**

Historically, masculinity was defined as a series of qualities such as resilience, strength, and dominance, which did not leave much room for vulnerability or psychological expressiveness. However, in the present times, evolving gender norms, better awareness of mental health issues, socio-cultural factors, and evolution in media narratives have all together worked towards evolution of masculinity. The roots of what many people view as masculinity developed thousands of years ago, when early homo sapiens used

strength, for example, to exert dominance or take charge. In early human history, traits like aggression, ruthlessness, and physical strength would have made males more successful in hunting and combat, thus making them more desirable.

Analytical men studies started back in the 1970s. The term "toxic masculinity" is linked to the 1980s mythopoetic men's movement, created by men for men as a space to express their sense of 'manliness.' Sociological theorists in the 1990s developed critiques of gender role theories of masculinity on the basis that they do not adequately incorporate an analysis of power into how the roles are created, enforced, and maintained within social systems. By 1995, the new psychology of men had gained prominence with the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity seeking recognition as APA's 51st division and the publication of *A New Psychology of Men* by Levant and Pollack.

Throughout much of the 20th century, masculinity was framed by traditional roles that cast men as providers, protectors, and leaders. Common traits associated with men were physical strength, emotional restraint, and a steadfast approach to life's hardships. Traditional masculinity was often a stoic ideal,

heavily reinforced through cultural narratives in literature, film, and media. John Wayne, the strong, silent archetype of a Western hero, epitomised the cultural expectation for men to endure without complaint and protect without falter. When it comes to processing emotions, men and women have distinct expectations. The experience and the expression are two elements of emotions. Suppression of emotional expression is a common norm of traditional masculinity. Scholars refer to this as emotional restrictiveness. From an existentialist perspective, this suppression represents a form of *bad faith*, where men deny their freedom and responsibility to authentically experience and express their emotions, instead conforming to societal expectations. The expressive aspect is that many men have difficulties in expression, meaning they do not say it with words, emotional expressions like crying, or by putting it in writing.

Emotional restrictiveness, and inexpressiveness have long been viewed as central norms for traditional male behaviour. Men's studies scholars pointed out the similarity between normative male restriction and the clinical condition known as Alexithymia. Alexithymia literally means

being unable to verbalize emotions. This normative restriction of male emotions is prevalent in men raised under traditional masculinity norms. The resultant wide-scale challenge for men in the identification of emotions and voicing them using words hampers them from using the best methods of relieving stress and trauma in life. It thereby makes such men cope with stress in ways that make certain forms of pathology more likely, including substance abuse, violent behaviour, sexual compulsions, stress-related illness, and early death. Existentialism reframes emotional vulnerability as an act of courage and authenticity. By acknowledging their emotions and confronting societal norms, men can engage in a more authentic existence, transcending the constraints of toxic masculinity. All masculine traits could be labelled with the term "toxic masculinity," which risks generalizing and devaluing all males, not just specific traits. However, from a healthy standpoint, masculinity itself is not inherently toxic. As feelings or even the discussion of emotions contradicts the established masculine value system, there is the increased risk that a male with a mental health condition would not even try to receive professional care and possibly not speak to

friends and family about it either. It is estimated that one in five men experiences mental health challenges, yet they are significantly less likely than women to seek professional help.

Depression and anxiety are two of the most common mental health disorders around the world and are prevalent in men. However, their symptoms often do not correspond to the classic manifestations, so they are easily underdiagnosed. Masculinity norms, such as emotional stoicism, self-reliance, and the suppression of 'weak' feelings, often make it harder for men to recognize their emotional distress or to seek help. This can lead to a tendency to 'mask' mental health issues through substance abuse, risky behaviour, and aggression. Mental health problems are often wrongly seen as signs of weakness or failure. Many men therefore feel embarrassed or ashamed about their problems. Such stigma is transmitted through different conduits in our society. Equally, societal expectations and norms might implicitly dissuade men from expressing vulnerability or seeking help. Adolph Hitler, the most prominent dictator in history himself suffered from depression but never believed to share it because vulnerability was considered as a weakness back then, much

like even in the present day, which shows that cultural norms and stereotypes about masculinity have been deeply ingrained over time.

Existentialist philosophy emphasizes further the importance of facing life's uncertainties and emotional struggles head-on. Kierkegaard's concept of the *leap of faith* suggests that embracing vulnerability and the unknown is essential for personal growth. For men, this means rejecting traditional masculine ideals that equate emotional expression with weakness, thereby reclaiming their freedom to define their identities authentically.

While men's roles have expanded to accommodate more emotionally nuanced and family-oriented practices, social support for these roles has been unable to keep pace. These initiatives require a shift from merely allowing males to discuss their mental health to encouraging them to talk, so they open about themselves and seek necessary help. This movement has continued to evolve, with contemporary visions of manhood increasingly embracing active and nurturing fatherhood as a virtuous and integral part of masculinity. Not least, there has been an increasing swell of excitement among men over self-care practices that reflects a larger cultural shift toward the

prioritization of mental and physical well-being. Younger generations are navigating a more fluid understanding of gender roles, allowing them to explore a broader range of opportunities and experiences. Therapy for older generations might involve exploring self-worth outside of traditional roles, while for younger generations, it could focus on managing the stress of choice overload and finding authentic purpose.

## **MASCULINITY AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Stoic, tough, self-reliant, unemotional. These are a few of the catchphrases associated with traditional masculinity. Additionally, they exert a powerful influence on some men. Even after decades of discussing how gender roles are evolving the idea that real men possess these qualities is ingrained in our society. It has long been known that men are less likely than women to seek help or treatment for mental health issues. Their likelihood of reporting any close friendships at all is lower than that of women. In the United States men typically die five years earlier than women and three to six times more frequently. Ninety percent of all killings and 77 percent of homicide victims in the US are men. Social constructions of masculinity have long impacted men's

emotional lives and mental health. Characteristics like emotional stoicism, dominance, and self-reliance are frequently emphasised in traditional ideas of masculinity. These principles can provide some men a feeling of self and direction, but they can also encourage negative attitudes and behaviours that have an adverse impact on mental health. Supporting homophobic and misogynistic beliefs and having a desire to dominate are traits of toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity refers to the cultural beliefs that men should exert an image of toughness and dominance in social spaces all the while suppressing any type of emotion because to do so is simply unacceptable. This leaves men with very few emotional outlets which can help in manifesting emotional suppression, aggression, and aversion to being vulnerable. Toxic masculinity does not allow for treatment of physical and emotional injuries because that would mean that they are not tough enough. These 3 toxic traits are the cause and root of where toxic masculinity stems from. The expectations to “be a man” often leave men with no way to fully express themselves and some consequences of which are depression, anxiety, and suicide.

Masculinity becomes fragile through its rigidity. When it cannot afford to hold the panoply of gender expressions, sexual cultural orientations, or feminine strength intrinsic to any pluralistic society, then it must lash out, or risk crumbling under the weight of its own culturally-constituted expectations. Whatever the cause, the response is [almost] always a form of violence... Sometimes this violence is outwardly expressed through physical dominance or aggression. Other times it is inwardly expressed, through depression, addiction, or suicide.

Approximately 75% of the one million suicide fatalities that occur each year worldwide are men. Recent studies show a connection between men's purposeful pursuit of hegemonic masculinity through emotional restraint and suicide. The spectrum of suicidal men's emotional practices, in particular how they use their emotions to actively seek or oppose hegemonic masculine values, is not well understood. They were taught as children that while expressing feelings like grief diminished one's manly status, expressing feelings like wrath through violent acts may elevate one's position. There were men for whom it was impossible to hide growing sorrow. For some males, violent outbursts led

to criminal conviction, relationship dissolution, or loss of employment. Another way to exhibit masculinity would be by suicide, in which the body would be both the object and the method of violence.

According to research, men's mental health may suffer if they adhere to traditional and hegemonic masculinity. The disparity between idealized and real-life experiences may cause anxiety. A man's capabilities restrict him to exhibiting stereotypically masculine attitudes and behaviours that are socially acceptable such as heterosexuality stoicism and emotional repression. This paradox confuses the sometimes-oversimplified perception of men and masculinity as either positive or negative. Masculinity may be advantageous or disadvantageous depending on how it is marketed or portrayed. The idea of gender role stress which describes the anxiety men experience when they do not live up to social expectations serves as an excellent example of this paradox. Based on the psychology of social norms society expects men to meet the standards of masculinity. The term gender role norms describe these presumptions and ideas. Men who conform to stereotypical gender role assumptions are likely to experience tension and anxiety when that role is questioned. Men

may experience psychological effects (such as anxiety poor emotional regulation low self-esteem and insecurity) and physiological effects (such as changes in the cardiovascular and neurological systems) when they try to fit in with gender role expectations. Research shows that men who adhere to stereotypical male beliefs—particularly the notion that men must be unemotional and restrict their emotions—tend to feel more fearful of both positive and negative feelings. This pertains to an experiential dimension of masculinity since, as noted earlier, stereotypical men find it difficult to handle sensitive feelings (like anxiety and shame) due to their perceived inadequacy in masculinity. Men experience anxiety about not living up to masculine stereotypes, which is followed by strong emotions that are not associated with "being a man." This is a positive feedback loop. Anxiety and the strain of gender roles may worsen as a result. Additionally, this cycle might develop into a conditioned reaction that is no longer supported by unfavourable social feedback. According to lab tests, men may become more anxious if they believe that their masculinity is in danger (for example, by participating in stereotypically feminine activities). To conform their feelings and emotional

expression with gender role expectations, men experiencing stress from gender role strain might adopt behavioural coping methods (like substance abuse or engaging in violent and risky sexual activities) or emotional coping techniques (including denial or repression). This may have detrimental long-term effects on wellbeing and mental health. Depression among men is frequently underdiagnosed and untreated, as symptoms may manifest in ways that align with masculine stereotypes, such as anger, irritability, or substance abuse.

When faced with obstacles in life, psychological resilience—the capacity to adjust and bounce back from hardship, is seen as a virtue. However, traditional masculinity often appropriates the idea of resilience by combining it with emotional repression and unwavering toughness. Although resilience is unquestionably beneficial, it can be harmful if misinterpreted in the context of strict gender norms. For example, men who view vulnerability as a flaw that contradicts their identity might feel compelled to suffer mentally without speaking out. In addition to impeding emotional healing, this misguided notion of resilience feeds cycles of unresolved trauma. In its purest form, resilience entails recognizing and managing feelings, looking

for help, and using flexible coping strategies—actions that are frequently dissuaded by conventional masculinity.

It is well-known that men are less inclined than women to pursue mental health therapy. A recent poll discovered that just 35 percent of men indicated they would pursue professional mental health support, while 58 percent of women would. It is obvious that since men are less prone to experiencing mental health issues, they typically do not pursue therapy. Typically, it is the reverse. Approximately 40% of men in India refrain from discussing their mental health openly due to stigma and misunderstandings, such as the incorrect belief that men must handle their emotions independently and a mental health framework that minimizes the indications of male depression. Numerous men who feel physical discomfort, rage, or numbness instead of sadness can receive a depression diagnosis from existing mental health assessment systems. These symptoms are common in affective disorders, but according to current criteria, they are neither required nor sufficient for a diagnosis.

Over the span of a century in screen media, viewers have witnessed minimal shifts in how masculinity is portrayed. Frequently, male

characters conform to the damaging stereotype of being emotionally unyielding and physically aggressive. The rare instances when they show vulnerability are limited to what is deemed an acceptable level of male expression. Although with increasing awareness about mental health media has started to show men in a light of being capable of complex emotions. In contemporary films, men are more frequently depicted as vulnerable, showcasing their challenges with intricate emotions, facing personal challenges, and candidly revealing their fears and insecurities. This shift permits viewers to witness a more nuanced and relatable representation of masculinity that transcends the conventional "tough guy" stereotype. Notable examples of this trend include "A Star is Born," "The Hurt Locker," and "Manchester by the Sea."

### **MASCULINITY AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Our approach to relationships is greatly influenced by our socialization. Girls are socialized to want to marry from birth. Girls discover romance and boyfriends are their key to success while boys discover that relationships are something to endure or even enjoy second to their professional aspirations.

Men need to be successful and self-sufficient before committing to a long-term relationship. Girls date and marry boys who have not thought about marriage for years while they spend years working out how their first names sound with the last name of their latest crush. If boys are not taught to value romantic relationships from an early age there will undoubtedly be an imbalance in the importance that girls and boys place on their relationships. We also know that stereotypes that are incompatible with emotional intimacy may be instilled in boys during their upbringing. Boys are pushed to be tough and straight and to give up more emotion-sensitive feelings like love and longing. They are expected to want sex have sex and exhibit sexual dominance. These days girls are urged to possess traits that are traditionally associated with men like strength intelligence and leadership. But boys, however, are not advised to behave more like girls. Being "girly" is a derogatory term that connotes being gay, emotional, or weak. Nowadays, when boys express a favourable opinion of another boy, they frequently follow it up with "no homo," a declaration that they are neither gay nor girly. Since they've convinced themselves for so long that they don't need anyone,

admitting helplessness can be interpreted as being "soft."

As they grew older, some young men are fortunate enough to maintain strong male friendships that began during their college years. Yet, forming authentic connections with other men can be daunting for numerous individuals. Why are there so many men without true friends? Since they find it awkward to be vulnerable, many young men—especially straight men—are reluctant to confide in their male peers. Or they might struggle to communicate their feelings to male friends, but find it easier to do so with a romantic partner. However, having close male friendships is essential for wellbeing. Having supportive friends who are there for him no matter what and with whom he can discuss anything improves a young man's mental health. Close male friendships that let young men express their emotions and be vulnerable without fear of shame or condemnation are essential. In 2021, the Survey Centre on American Life found that only one in five men and two in five women, respectively, reported getting social support from guy friends in the previous week. These kinds of statistics have prompted experts to refer to male friendships as experiencing a "friendship recession." What

is the reason behind men losing friends as they age? As young boys, they have not yet felt the societal pressure to "be masculine" and hide their feelings. However, as they get older it frequently gets harder for them to question the expectations of what men should or should not do. One of these stereotypes also includes the idea that people are weak if they do not show their feelings or rely on other people. Men are also not always able to transition a friendship from doing things together to talking about sensitive topics. Yes, doing things that they both enjoy is a great way for male best friends to spend time together. Nonetheless a genuine friendship needs to be flexible and go beyond shared activities. Feeling psychologically safe is crucial for men to be open and expressive in order to form meaningful male friendships that go beyond simple activity participation. Young men must think that sharing private information about themselves will not make them feel ashamed or rejected. Some young men might think that having a close friend is something that only children do or that meaningful deep connections are only for women. After witnessing the behaviour of their female partner with her female friends they might believe that only women are capable of such a close friendship. Without close

friendships they might also persuade themselves that they are adequate on their own. It is frequently believed that emotional literacy—the capacity to recognize comprehend and communicate one’s own emotions as well as to empathize with those of others—is less important for boys and men. If you find it difficult to recognize your own feelings let alone express them to others it becomes difficult to establish and preserve friendships that go beyond surface-level relationships. Even if they do have friendships young men frequently find it difficult to make the effort necessary to keep and strengthen them. Studies reveal that women invest more effort in their relationships with their closest friends by contacting messaging and meeting up with them. Even with people they regard as their closest friends’ men appear to be less inclined to stay in touch. They also typically meet up with friends in a group setting where the conversations are more superficial and less emotional. Strong friendship groups and active social lives provide a great deal of social support. But having a single male best friend might be better for a young man’s mental health than having dozens of superficial acquaintances. Mutual respect trust and candid and open communication are the hallmarks of

close male friendships. Furthermore, men who have close male friendships are willing to support one another through both good and bad times. The ability to be authentic express your genuine feelings and feel accepted for who you are has a significant positive impact on mental health. Because they frequently find it difficult to build close relationships with other men straight men may rely too much on their romantic partners for emotional support. Many men feel more comfortable expressing their emotions and being vulnerable when they are with a woman. A young man may feel ashamed if he is having difficulties and does not want to appear weak in front of the guys. But a romantic partner should not take the place of close friends. Men’s mental health depends on the development of sincere relationships within male friendships which provide a unique kind of intimacy. Furthermore, depending too heavily on a female partner for emotional support can be detrimental to a romantic relationship. One person cannot satisfy everyone. All connections that meet your physical and emotional needs are considered interpersonal relationships. The strongest relationships you have in your life are with these individuals. While romantic partnerships entail interpersonal ties so do

close friends and family. A concept called secondary interpersonal relationships exists. This includes the people you regularly interact with such as neighbours and acquaintances. In essence every person you know has a personal relationship of some kind. Knowing how to develop and maintain relationships is vital given how important they are to our mental and physical well-being. It takes work to maintain friendships and other relationships. The most important and fundamental element is communication. Talking about your feelings in person is necessary for this. Texting and online messaging often do not have the same impact even though they can occasionally be very rewarding. Prioritize spending time with your loved ones in person. You can also investigate local gatherings and online forums to find opportunities to engage in essential social interactions. In the end having a good relationship with yourself is a prerequisite for building interpersonal relationships. Set aside time to learn about yourself and prioritize taking care of yourself. Consult a therapist for advice and support if certain problems are impeding your capacity to connect with others.

## **ETHICAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN PERPETUATING TOXIC MASCULINITY**

It is essential to examine the moral responsibility of people to address toxic masculinity. To understand the complex relation between autonomy, social conditioning, and collective obligation in sustaining or opposing toxic masculinity we must examine moral philosophy, the ethics of responsibility, and social justice theories.

Ethical theory, especially libertarian ethics, highlights the significance of personal autonomy in confronting detrimental norms. Immanuel Kant's idea of the categorical imperative highlights that people should behave in manners that honour their own dignity as well as that of others. This suggests that when people recognize the harm caused by toxic masculinity, they bear a moral responsibility to resist it. Autonomy entails the capability to make moral choices, even when faced with societal pressures. For instance, an individual who recognizes the negative effects of maintaining emotional suppression in relationships holds the ethical duty to confront these actions. This viewpoint emphasizes the necessity of introspection. Libertarian ethics

suggests that people ought to consider their actions to understand how they might cause harm. The idea of self-ownership asserts that every individual possesses ownership rights over themselves and is free to act as they wish, provided they do not violate the rights of others. Self-examination enhances understanding of hidden biases and actions linked to toxic masculinity. The ethical obligation to behave properly, regardless of societal influences, imposes a substantial duty on individuals to counter toxic masculinity once they recognize its effects.

Although libertarian ethics highlights personal autonomy, social determinism theories contend that individuals are significantly shaped by their social surroundings. Thinkers such as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault argue that people are shaped by social frameworks and ideologies. Toxic masculinity is sustained by cultural norms, media, and institutional practices that uphold conventional masculine ideals. For example, boys are frequently taught to see emotional vulnerability as a flaw, a belief strengthened by family expectations and societal cues. Nevertheless, social determinism does not free individuals from responsibility. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist perspective posits that

people are "condemned to freedom" and must make decisions, even amidst the limitations of their social environments. Though societal influences can affect behaviour, individuals still have the power to resist these conventions. For instance, a man brought up in a society that glorifies aggression might nonetheless opt to forsake violent actions by thoughtfully confronting and opposing these damaging values. Sartre's concept of freedom emphasizes the moral obligation to tackle toxic masculinity, even when influenced by deeply rooted socialization.

Apart from personal accountability, the ethics of responsibility highlights the communal aspect of sustaining detrimental norms. Peter Singer's utilitarian ethics and Iris Marion Young's idea of collective responsibility suggest that individuals bear moral responsibility for systemic harms. Toxic masculinity functions as a social detriment, leading to problems like gender-based violence, mental health challenges, and disparity. People who embrace behaviours or beliefs that uphold these norms, whether intentionally or unintentionally, add to this damage. From a deontological standpoint, opposing toxic masculinity is an inherent moral obligation as it supports values of

respect and dignity. Embracing actions that contest conventional gender roles—like showing vulnerability or fostering equal relationships—aligns with moral obligations to respect others. From a consequentialist perspective opposing toxic masculinity leads to improved societal results by decreasing violence, enhancing mental well-being, and encouraging equality.

Theories of social justice highlight the duty individuals have in tackling structural harm. John Rawls' concept of justice emphasizes the necessity of establishing a society that guarantees equitable chances for everyone. Toxic masculinity erodes fairness by maintaining gender disparities and limiting people's abilities to succeed. Tackling these systemic issues necessitates that individuals take steps to foster justice, like promoting mental health awareness or backing policies that confront gender-based discrimination. Martha Nussbaum's capabilities framework emphasizes the moral obligation to break down detrimental systems. This method underscores the significance of establishing circumstances that allow people to attain well-being and thrive. By opposing toxic masculinity, people help create a society where men and women can achieve their fullest potential.

Feminist ethics offers a valuable perspective for analyzing the social effects of toxic masculinity. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity posits that gender is created socially through actions and norms that are repeated. Toxic masculinity imposes strict, unnatural gender roles that negatively impact both men and women. Opposing these roles is a moral action that confronts patriarchal ideals and fosters both individual and communal health. Bell Hooks highlights that patriarchy adversely affects men by limiting their emotional expression and encouraging detrimental actions. Ethical accountability includes acknowledging and tackling how these standards negatively impact not just women but also men's mental well-being and their relationships. Men hold a moral obligation to confront patriarchal norms that sustain toxic masculinity, benefiting both their personal health and society. Critical race theory and intersectionality enhance our comprehension of ethical responsibility. Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasizes how the intersections of race, class, and gender contribute to distinct forms of oppression. Toxic masculinity impacts men differently; marginalized men often encounter extra pressures to adhere to hyper-masculine

standards while also facing systemic discrimination. Ethical responsibility demands tackling these overlapping forms of oppression.

### **REIMAGINING MANHOOD: TOWARD INCLUSIVE MASCULINITY**

Popular media and culture often depict idealized images of men as invulnerable and emotionally detached, reinforcing these damaging stereotypes. Constant societal messaging that equates emotional vulnerability with weakness makes men feel 'less than' or flawed for struggling with mental health issues. This leads to negative self-image, a sense of hopelessness, and further reluctance to seek help. Recently, some celebrities have found the courage to speak out regarding their struggles with mental health and, therefore, challenged the stigma surrounding men's mental health. Renowned Hollywood actor, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, known for his 'tough guy' roles, revealed his battle with depression, debunking the myth that mental health issues are a sign of weakness. He emphasized the importance of seeking help, stating, "Depression never discriminates... it's incredibly important to talk about it and seek help when needed." In the music industry, rapper Logic released a hit single titled '1-800-

273-8255' (the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's number) to increase awareness about mental health and suicide. Known for: A renowned musician and performer. Defying traditional notions: Prince challenged gender norms through his flamboyant fashion choices, makeup, and androgynous style. He embraced both masculine and feminine qualities, breaking down stereotypes and encouraging individuality. "As a father, grandfather, and longtime youth football coach, it has always been important to me to build positive and educational environments for all children. We wanted to bring our show to YouTube and YouTube Kids which provides free access to everyone, so all the kids can enjoy it," Snoop Dogg told CNN. These celebrities exemplify the rising movement to eliminate the stigma from men's mental health, making it clear that nobody, no matter how strong they are or of what status, is exempted from mental illness.

This framework has been crucial for understanding men's mental health by looking at the intersection of identities, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, in understanding how these identities intersect to create individual experiences. For instance, Black men may face unique challenges due to the combined effects of racial discrimination and

societal expectations of masculinity, potentially leading to reluctance in seeking mental health support.

Mental health–related discrimination has an adverse effect on limiting mental health–care access, help-seeking behaviours, and initial treatment of those experiencing mental illness, therefore contributing to an increased morbidity and mortality rate of those suffering from mental illness. Manhood should be redefined as a dynamic and inclusive concept that moves beyond outdated stereotypes, embracing emotional authenticity, equality, and diversity as its core tenets. Inclusive masculinity realizes that strength does not come from concealing vulnerability but rather from the courage to expose it, creating healthier relationships and more just social systems. Inclusive Masculinity is a step towards discovering and promoting ways of being where men love privately and publicly across all types of differences, including social identity differences. The cornerstone of this new masculinity lies in the four principles of Consistency, Mutuality, Sharing, and Positive Emotion. Consistency requires men to take their values as something that should be unwavering in their commitments—a rock on which others can rely. Mutuality focuses on the

nurturing of reciprocal bonds in the community, loyalty, and fulfilling obligations with a sense of interdependence. Sharing goes beyond personal interests, highlighting a common purpose and collective action for the good of all. Finally, Positive Emotion views strength in warmth, encouragement, and good humour as a potent force to inspire and uplift others. Each of these lessons adapts conventional and traditional concepts of masculinity and offers a view that is simultaneously energizing and liberating. They challenge men to reconsider their roles and responsibilities, so men are better enriched by the depth and richness of this concept of manhood. The shift from the old paradigm to this new vision was not only a matter of societal expectation but also a matter of an aspiration for themselves and their role in a world connected and communal. Inclusive masculinity must also incorporate intersectionality to ensure that all men, regardless of their background or identity, are included in this evolving framework.

To foster better mental health outcomes for men, a multifaceted approach that integrates educational initiatives, therapeutic interventions, and legal reforms is essential. Educational initiatives on mental health in

schools and universities will help normalize the discussion of mental wellness and reduce stigma. Besides programs that create an awareness of mental health, school curricula should present topics such as stress management, emotional intelligence, and the amount of harm that toxic masculinity poses for mental health. School curricula must also engage with diverse male identity representations, emotional expression, and gender studies so that these students can critically look at stereotypes and understand healthier forms of masculinity. Educators and staff should be trained to identify early warning signs of mental health issues in male students and support them appropriately. On the other hand, male mentors should be encouraged to open about mental health issues so that boys and men can model the behaviour of being open about it. Programs on emotional literacy, such as journaling and role-playing, will help boys and men better express and regulate their emotions. Peer support systems encourage open communication and reduce stigma. Fathers should be taken through workshops and media literacy programs that would make healthy, more inclusive portrayals of masculinity a norm, thereby encouraging a culture where young males feel safe to express

their emotions. In doing so, these initiatives will enable institutions to play a crucial role in shaping a generation of men who value their emotional well-being and inclusivity.

Therapeutic intervention in the treatment of men's mental health will create safe, judgment-free spaces where the male individual can open about their feelings and experiences. These interventions can range from individual therapy to group therapy and counselling that embraces emotional literacy, vulnerability, and self-compassion. CBT also has proven efficacy among men with regards to helping remove or reverse negative thought patterns and to enhance emotional regulation. In this regard, trauma-informed therapy can be of great utility because it deals with how past experiences and societal pressures affect mental health. Therapeutic interventions should be made with a view to considering intersectional factors affecting men's mental health, including their cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Support groups may be very helpful as well in this regard, for they provide a community for sharing experience, overcoming stigma, and establishing supportive networks. Breaking free from strict notions of masculinity will encourage the

expression of emotion and end up in better, healthier, and fulfilling lives for men.

Legal reforms can be the main solutions to reducing mental health issues in men, as they can lead to an environment where more men feel safe seeking care and receiving services. Policies protecting against discrimination on grounds of mental health and promoting equal access to mental health services are key to promoting well-being. Therefore, the legal framework should challenge the social norms that allow the stigma associated with mental health, especially among men who have been conditioned to suppress emotions and vulnerability.

The Men's rights movement started in India sometime in 1998 by a Supreme Court Advocate namely Ram Prakash Chug with an intention to provide legal guidance and to draw attention of people and lawmakers about the men's issue. Furthermore, the incorporation of mental health education and resources within the workplace has been identified as an effective tool for promoting mental well-being. Legal reforms that mandate mental health education and workplace support can help reduce the barriers men face in addressing their mental health needs. Several countries, such as Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Australia,

have put forth and implemented gender-neutral legislation. In May 2016, the University Grants Commission introduced a set of regulations known as the "UGC Sexual Harassment Regulations," which require higher educational institutions to take strong action against all forms of gender-based violence. According to Regulation 3(1)(d) of the Regulation: "Higher educational institutions must take strong action against all forms of gender-based violence targeting employees and students of all genders, acknowledging the vulnerability of primarily women employees and students, as well as some male students and students of the third gender, to various types of sexual harassment, humiliation, and exploitation." Reforming laws related to mental health could also ensure better training for law enforcement officers and first responders, helping them recognize signs of mental health crises and handle them with empathy and understanding. These legal measures are part of a larger shift that recognizes mental health care as a fundamental human right and ensures that men from all walks of life have the tools and resources to thrive. While the POCSO Act covers sexual offenses against male children, there is no similar provision for adult males. This

disparity raises the question of why legal protections differ based on age. The practical reality shown by Insia Dariwala's research with 1,500 men is that men are significantly stigmatized by sexual harassment due to shame (55%), confusion (50.9%), fear (43%) and guilt (28.7%). The UK has made some important steps towards inclusivity while retaining gender specificity in the evolution of rape law. Initially, the Criminal Justice and Public Relations Act of 1944 amended the law to recognize anal and vaginal penetration, marking the first formal recognition of male rape in the legal system. Due to this, the Sexual Rights Act 2003 in England and Wales made further improvements in these laws by removing vague descriptions of oral sex and indecent assault. Although there is much progress, rape in the UK is still defined as penile penetration, which means that women cannot be raped by men according to the law today. The imperative is to recognize and highlight the impact of such actions on the health and behaviour of a community given that men can be victims of violence and women can be perpetrators. These impacts are manifested in different dimensions such as physical, psychological, social, and economic ones. By reforming laws, society can address

the systemic barriers that prevent men from seeking help, while fostering a supportive environment where mental health issues are recognized and treated with dignity.

Redefining masculinity and integrating inclusive approaches across educational, therapeutic, and legal frameworks is necessary for dismantling stigma around men's mental health. Society can encourage men to prioritize their health by promoting emotional honesty, supporting vulnerability, and providing necessary resources. Legal reforms, alongside mental health policies, can create a more inclusive environment, encouraging all men, regardless of their background or identity, to focus on their emotional well-being without fear of judgment or discrimination. These collective actions can foster a culture of care, resilience, and compassion, enabling men to flourish both individually and within their communities.

### **CONCLUSION**

Redefining male mental health requires moving beyond rigid, traditional masculinity constructs toward more inclusive and empathetic conceptualization of emotional wellbeing. This work shines a light on the dangers of toxic masculinity: suppressing feelings through repression, encouraging

aggression, and avoiding vulnerability when it is needed. In this sense, shifting societal demands that encourage men to rethink how emotional vulnerability constitutes strength in their character rather than weakness as we find today may in turn challenge those norms as well as healthier expressions of masculine identity.

The findings advocate for a holistic approach that integrates philosophical, psychological, and ethical perspectives to dismantle toxic norms and promote awareness. This requires encouraging emotional awareness, open conversation, and a safe space where men feel comfortable to open up about vulnerability without judgment. Educators, therapists, and policymakers play an important role in creating change by developing programs that challenge stereotypes, encourage emotional honesty, and access mental health resources. If the concept of masculinity is redefined and based on empathy, mutuality, and emotional authenticity, then society would empower men to put mental health at the top of their agendas. Such a transformation enhances individual well-being and creates more equitable and compassionate communities. The tale of "boys don't cry" would be replaced by that of

emotional strength and resilience by becoming more aware and active.

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Received on Jan 25, 2025

Accepted on Feb 29, 2025

Published on April 01, 2025

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