



Masculinity in the Twenty-First Century: Transformation, Perceived Threat, and Its Relationship with Human Development

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Abstract

Masculinity remains a powerful social institution through which societies organise expectations concerning men's identities, responsibilities, relationships, labour, authority, protection, fatherhood, and citizenship. Although men have made indispensable contributions to infrastructure, science, industry, defence, religion, education, transportation, governance, and economic development, these achievements cannot be attributed to masculinity alone or separated from women's labour, institutions, technology, class relations, and collective organisation. Contemporary debates nevertheless suggest that masculinity is under threat because women have entered occupations and leadership positions historically reserved for men, men are increasingly encouraged to express vulnerability, provide care, reject violence, and share domestic responsibilities. This paper critically examines whether these developments represent the destruction of masculinity, a crisis affecting groups of men, or an adaptive transformation in the social meanings of manhood. Drawing on hegemonic masculinity, social constructionism, gender-role strain, precarious manhood, intersectionality, and caring masculinities, the analysis argues that there is no singular masculinity that can be either universally preserved or uniformly destroyed. Some men face serious disadvantages in education, health, employment, family life, and social belonging. But the problems arise from interactions among economic restructuring, class inequality, racialisation, institutional neglect, technological change, and restrictive gender expectations rather than simply from women's advancement. The present paper concludes that human development requires neither the feminisation of men nor the masculinisation of women, but the construction of plural, ethical, protective, emotionally competent, productive, and caring masculinities compatible with gender equality and human dignity.

Keywords: masculinity, men and boys, human development, gender equality, hegemonic masculinity, male crisis, caring masculinities, precarious manhood.

Introduction

Masculinity is frequently understood through visible demonstrations of strength, power, provision, courage, discipline, protection, endurance, leadership, decision-making, the showing of less emotion, and productive labour, which is framed by culture through socialisation (Anderson, 2010; Burstyn, 1983; Chevannes, 2001; Connell, 1995, 2012, 2020; DeGue et al., 2023; Kimmel, 2012, 2018; Petersen & Petersen, 1998). Across historical societies, men have played substantial roles in agriculture, construction, engineering, maritime activity, military defence, transportation, religious organisation, manufacturing, scientific discovery, and political administration. Roads, bridges, ships, aeroplanes, schools, hospitals, churches, factories, communication systems, and national institutions have often depended upon male labour, particularly where occupational structures assigned physically demanding or hazardous work predominantly to men. However, describing these achievements solely as products of masculinity requires caution because material development also depended on women's paid and unpaid labour, accumulated knowledge, capital, state institutions, colonial extraction, technology, and intergenerational cooperation. Masculinity may motivate forms of duty and sacrifice, but it is not an autonomous force that constructs infrastructure independently of economic and institutional arrangements. A scholarly analysis must therefore recognise men's contributions without converting human development into an exclusively male accomplishment or treating masculine identity as biologically fixed. Masculinity is better understood as a changing configuration of practices through which societies define, reward, regulate, and sometimes punish particular ways of being a man (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connor et al., 2021; Itulua-Abumere, 2013).

The twenty-first century has intensified disputes over whether masculinity is adapting constructively or experiencing an existential crisis. Women's expanding participation in higher education, professional employment, political leadership, property ownership, military service, entrepreneurship, and household decision-making has altered institutions historically structured around male authority, and this may be construed as a gender paradigm shift (Tandon, 2008). At the same time, men are increasingly expected to participate in childcare, domestic labour, emotional communication, non-violent conflict resolution, and relationships based upon consent and equality. Some observers interpret these developments as evidence that men are becoming feminised and that women are assuming masculine positions, thereby destabilising families and weakening civilisation (Di Stefano, 2019). There is a contending perspective that the language of masculine decline represents a backlash against women's liberation and mistakenly treats the loss of male monopoly as the loss of male dignity (Connell, 2020; Sunderland, 1991). Both interpretations can become analytically inadequate when they reduce complex economic, cultural, and demographic transformations to a contest between men and women. The central issue is not whether masculinity is simply disappearing, but which masculinities are declining, which are emerging, whose interests they serve, and how these transformations affect human development.

There are genuine reasons for concern about the circumstances of many boys and men, and dismissing these concerns would weaken rather than strengthen gender scholarship. Boys experience educational disengagement in numerous settings; men in many societies have elevated exposure to occupational injury, violence, incarceration, homelessness, substance

misuse, premature mortality, social isolation, and suicide. UNESCO (2022) reports that boys are more likely than girls in many contexts to repeat grades, fail to progress, leave school early, or experience weak learning outcomes, although girls continue to face severe exclusion in particular countries and at educational levels. The World Health Organization (2020, 2025) similarly identifies shorter male life expectancy, higher mortality, reduced help-seeking, and masculine norms of self-reliance and emotional control as important men's-health concerns. These outcomes do not prove that women's progress has caused male decline, but they demonstrate that gender-responsive policy must address the vulnerabilities of men and boys alongside continuing inequalities affecting women and girls. A credible analysis must consequently reject both anti-male narratives that pathologise masculinity wholesale and anti-feminist narratives that blame women's advancement for every difficulty experienced by men.

Research Problem

Public discussion commonly treats masculinity as though it were a single, stable possession shared equally by all men, yet scholarship demonstrates considerable variation across class, race, nationality, age, sexuality, religion, disability, occupation, and historical period. The language of a general crisis can conceal the fact that affluent men may retain extensive institutional power, while working-class, racialised, unemployed, disabled, migrant, or socially isolated men experience significant insecurity. Equally, arguments celebrating the disappearance of traditional masculinity may disregard the social value of courage, responsibility, protection, skilled labour, perseverance, public service, and intergenerational provision when these qualities are exercised ethically. The intellectual challenge is to distinguish constructive masculine capacities from domination, emotional suppression, misogyny, homophobia, violence, and rigid breadwinner expectations. It is also necessary to determine whether men's contemporary difficulties arise from masculinity itself, from changing economic institutions, from gendered socialisation, or from failures to provide men with meaningful routes into adulthood. Without such differentiation, masculinity becomes either romanticised as the foundation of civilisation or condemned as the principal source of gender oppression. This paper addresses that conceptual problem by examining masculinity as a plural social system that can support or obstruct human development depending upon its institutional form.

Research Objectives

1. To critically examine the historical and contemporary meanings of masculinity.
2. To evaluate the claim that masculinity is under threat in the twenty-first century.
3. To distinguish between the transformation of masculinity and the deterioration of men's social conditions.
4. To analyse the contribution of men and masculine identities to human development.
5. To assess how education, employment, health, family change, technology, media, and gender equality affect contemporary men.
6. To evaluate hegemonic, precarious, inclusive, protective, productive, and caring forms of masculinity.
7. To propose policy and institutional responses that support men and boys without undermining women's rights and gender equality.

Research Questions

1. How should masculinity be defined in the twenty-first century?
2. To what extent is masculinity socially constructed, culturally variable, and historically transformed?
3. Is masculinity genuinely under threat, or are particular forms of male authority losing legitimacy?
4. How have men and masculine practices contributed to human development?
5. What contemporary educational, economic, health, familial, and psychological challenges affect men and boys?
6. Does women's advancement necessarily reduce men's status, identity, or developmental contribution?
7. What forms of masculinity are most compatible with human development, social stability, gender equality, and personal wellbeing?

Conceptualising Masculinity

Masculinity is not synonymous with biological maleness because it refers to socially organised meanings, practices, expectations, and identities associated with being recognised as a man. Biological sex may influence embodiment, reproduction, physical development, and some average behavioural tendencies, but societies determine which capacities are celebrated, prohibited, or interpreted as masculine. Men learn masculinity through families, schools, religious institutions, peer groups, workplaces, sports, military organisations, media, law, and relationships with women and other men. These institutions communicate expectations concerning how men should speak, dress, work, compete, provide, protect, express emotion, respond to danger, and exercise authority. Masculinity is therefore simultaneously personal and institutional because men perform identities within structures that reward some conduct and penalise other conduct. The American Psychological Association (2018) accordingly treats masculine identities as diverse and encourages flexible forms that protect health rather than assuming one masculine ideal applies universally. This distinction permits scholars to affirm male identity while critically examining gender norms that damage men, women, children, and communities.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity remains central because it explains how one culturally honoured configuration of manhood can legitimise men's collective dominance, subordinating women and marginalising other men. Hegemonic masculinity does not mean that every man is powerful, violent, wealthy, heterosexual, physically strong, or emotionally restricted. Rather, it describes an idealised pattern that becomes culturally authoritative and helps organise relationships among multiple masculinities and between masculinity and femininity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) later clarified that hegemonic masculinity is relational, historically changeable, geographically variable, and reproduced through institutions rather than reducible to a fixed list of negative male traits. Men may benefit from a gender order without fully embodying its dominant ideal; marginalised men may possess limited power despite being male. The theory consequently prevents the simplistic assumption that all men are equally privileged or that masculinity has identical meanings across societies. It also explains why the

weakening of one dominant ideal need not signify the extinction of masculinity, because new configurations can emerge and compete for legitimacy.

Precarious manhood theory provides another explanation for why perceived threats to masculinity can produce anxiety, aggression, withdrawal, or exaggerated demonstrations of toughness. The theory proposes that manhood is often treated as a status that must be socially earned, publicly demonstrated, and continually defended rather than automatically secured. Men who believe that masculinity can be easily lost may respond strongly to unemployment, romantic rejection, public humiliation, physical weakness, economic dependence, or women's success. Research discussing precarious manhood emphasises that expectations of agency and dominance can become particularly restrictive for men, even where women experience stronger constraints in other domains. The concept helps explain why social change may be experienced as personal emasculation when masculine worth depends upon outperforming women or controlling dependants. However, the theory should not be universalised because men differ in their emotional resources, cultural environments, economic positions, and attachment to traditional norms. Its greatest value lies in showing that perceived masculine threat is often produced by fragile standards of recognition rather than by the actual disappearance of men's social usefulness.

Caring masculinities offer a constructive alternative by integrating responsibility, emotional openness, non-dominating relationships, caregiving, protection, and interdependence into masculine identity. This approach rejects the claim that care, gentleness, nurturing, and vulnerability necessarily feminise men or make them socially weak. A father who protects his children, shares domestic labour, provides emotional security, maintains discipline without violence, and supports his partner may remain recognisably masculine, expanding the meaning of strength. Scholarship nevertheless warns that caring masculinity can become superficial when privileged men perform selective fatherhood without challenging the unequal distribution of difficult or poorly rewarded care work. Caring masculinities must therefore involve material responsibility and gender justice rather than merely adopting a more attractive public identity. Their developmental importance lies in connecting protection with empathy, leadership with service, and authority with accountability. Such masculinities do not abolish masculine identity but reconstruct it for societies in which domination is no longer accepted as the primary evidence of manhood.

Masculinity and Human Development

Human development concerns the expansion of people's capabilities, freedoms, health, knowledge, security, participation, dignity, and opportunities rather than the production of infrastructure alone. Men's labour has undeniably contributed to roads, bridges, buildings, ships, energy systems, agriculture, engineering, defence, science, transportation, and public administration. Many men have accepted physically dangerous occupations, long periods away from family, military risk, industrial injury, and bodily exhaustion in fulfilment of expectations to provide and protect. These contributions should be recognised because societies sometimes celebrate elite male authority, ignoring the sacrifices of ordinary workers, fathers, tradesmen, farmers, seafarers, miners, drivers, technicians, and emergency personnel. Nevertheless, human

development has always depended upon complementary labour, including women's reproductive work, caregiving, teaching, nursing, agricultural production, community organisation, entrepreneurship, and intellectual contribution. The 2025 Human Development Report stresses that contemporary development problems remain fundamentally social and institutional rather than merely technological, reinforcing the importance of collective capability and accountable choice. Masculinity contributes most effectively to development when it encourages competence, stewardship, ethical protection, creativity, service, and responsibility without claiming ownership of civilisation.

The idea that masculinity means protection captures an important social expectation but requires careful ethical qualification. Protection may include defending children, supporting families, maintaining infrastructure, responding to disasters, enforcing just laws, producing food, securing communities, and accepting responsibility during emergencies. Yet protective rhetoric can also justify paternalism, surveillance, warfare, coercive control, or the denial of women's autonomy when men define themselves as protectors who must govern those they protect. Ethical protection must therefore be distinguished from possession, because safeguarding another person does not establish a right to dominate that person. Protection should also be reciprocal, since men require protection from occupational exploitation, violence, preventable illness, unsafe working conditions, psychological distress, and institutional neglect. A developmental understanding of masculinity consequently treats protection as service grounded in competence and accountability rather than as evidence of permanent male authority. This reformulation preserves the socially valuable dimensions of protection, rejecting practices that convert strength into entitlement.

Is Masculinity Under Threat?

The claim that masculinity is under threat contains both an empirical dimension and an interpretative dimension. Empirically, some traditional male roles have weakened because industrial restructuring, automation, globalisation, deindustrialisation, educational expansion, changing family patterns, and women's employment have transformed labour markets and households. Men whose identities were organised almost exclusively around manual labour, sole breadwinning, marital authority, or physical strength may experience diminished certainty when those roles become unavailable or insufficient. Interpretatively, however, the loss of exclusive male control is frequently described as the loss of masculinity itself, even when men retain opportunities to work, lead, parent, create, protect, and participate. This reasoning confuses equality with dispossession because it assumes that a role has value only when women are excluded from it. Women becoming engineers, political leaders, soldiers, pilots, doctors, clergy, or household providers does not inherently prevent men from occupying those roles. Masculinity is threatened only where it is defined as a monopoly over authority, resources, occupations, and social recognition.

There is stronger evidence for a crisis affecting men than for a universal crisis of masculinity. Educational underachievement, insecure employment, homelessness, imprisonment, addiction, social isolation, family estrangement, and suicide are concentrated among specific populations rather than distributed equally across all men. Class, race, disability, geography, migration status, sexuality, age, and family background mediate whether men can convert masculine expectations

into stable livelihoods and respected identities. UNESCO's work on boys' disengagement demonstrates the need for targeted intervention, also warning against approaches that place boys' advancement in opposition to girls' education. Similarly, the World Health Organization argues that men's health deserves dedicated policy attention because male mortality and help-seeking patterns cannot be adequately addressed through gender-neutral assumptions. The relevant crisis is therefore institutional and relational, involving inadequate pathways into education, work, health, intimacy, fatherhood, and community participation. Calling this solely a crisis of masculinity may obscure the economic and policy failures that leave vulnerable men without meaningful social roles.

The proposition that men are becoming feminised also rests upon an unstable opposition between masculine and feminine qualities. Emotional intelligence, caregiving, cooperation, verbal communication, aesthetic sensitivity, and non-violence do not biologically belong to women, just as courage, rationality, ambition, technical competence, and leadership do not biologically belong to men. Describing socially valuable capacities as feminine when men display them can shame men away from behaviours that improve mental health, relationships, parenting, and organisational performance. Conversely, describing women as masculinised when they exercise authority or technical skill implies that competence and leadership are naturally male possessions. Such classifications protect a rigid gender hierarchy rather than accurately describing human capacities. Men need not surrender strength in order to develop tenderness, and women need not surrender femininity in order to exercise authority. The twenty-first-century challenge is therefore integration, enabling individuals to combine agency and care without having their legitimacy questioned.

Education, Employment, and Economic Restructuring

Educational disadvantage among boys has become one of the most substantial arguments supporting claims of male decline. In many education systems, boys experience weaker reading performance, greater disciplinary exclusion, grade repetition, disengagement, and reduced progression into tertiary education. UNESCO reports that approximately 140 million boys are out of school globally, recognising that girls remain more disadvantaged at primary level in some regions and continue to face gender-specific barriers. These patterns cannot be explained by a single cause such as female teachers, feminised curricula, biology, father absence, or boys' lack of effort. They reflect interactions among poverty, literacy socialisation, school discipline, developmental variation, peer cultures, special educational needs, violence, labour expectations, and masculine beliefs that may frame academic diligence as unmanly. Effective policy should therefore provide early literacy support, vocational and technical pathways, mentoring, fair discipline, mental-health services, and positive male role models without lowering educational expectations. Supporting boys educationally is not a retreat from gender equality but an essential extension of it.

Employment transformation similarly destabilises masculinities organised around permanent industrial work and sole breadwinning. Automation and service-sector expansion have reduced some forms of manual employment, increasing demand for educational credentials, interpersonal communication, digital literacy, care work, and continuous retraining. Men who were socialised

to equate worth with physical labour or superior earnings may experience unemployment and economic dependence as personal failure rather than as consequences of structural economic change. This experience can be intensified where communities offer few alternative pathways to recognition, family contribution, craftsmanship, entrepreneurship, or civic leadership. At the same time, women's earnings can improve household security and should not be interpreted as an attack on men's dignity. The more sustainable response is to detach male worth from exclusive breadwinning, preserving the value of provision as one among several forms of family responsibility. Economic policy must create dignified work and training opportunities for men and women rather than relying on cultural arguments that attempt to restore obsolete occupational monopolies.

Masculinity, Health, and Mortality

Men's health provides particularly strong evidence that restrictive masculine norms can become developmentally harmful. Men may be rewarded for risk-taking, emotional control, pain tolerance, self-reliance, alcohol consumption, occupational endurance, and refusal of assistance, even when these practices increase preventable illness. The World Health Organization identifies self-reliance, difficulty expressing emotions, and expectations of self-control as barriers to men's mental-health help-seeking. Globally, suicide remains a major public-health concern, and WHO estimates indicate that 727,000 people died by suicide in 2021, with substantial mortality occurring before age fifty. Masculinity does not mechanically cause suicide, because economic hardship, trauma, psychiatric illness, relationship breakdown, isolation, substance misuse, violence, and access to lethal means also matter. However, norms that discourage disclosure and treatment can reduce the likelihood that distressed men receive timely support. Healthy masculinity must therefore redefine help-seeking as responsible self-preservation rather than weakness.

Public discourse often oscillates between blaming men for their health behaviour and portraying them as passive victims of social change. Both positions overlook how institutions are frequently designed without sufficient attention to men's communication styles, working patterns, cultural identities, or reluctance to enter services perceived as stigmatising. Men may respond more positively to outreach located in workplaces, sports organisations, religious communities, barbershops, technical colleges, veterans' groups, and digital platforms than to conventional clinical pathways alone. Health interventions should communicate in ways that preserve dignity, agency, privacy, competence, and practical problem-solving, creating space for emotional expression. The goal should not be to instruct men to communicate identically to women, because men themselves differ widely in how they process distress and seek support. Instead, services should broaden the legitimate repertoire of masculine coping, challenging isolation, violence, substance dependence, and untreated psychological suffering. A society that expects men to protect others but does not protect vulnerable men reproduces an ethically inconsistent form of masculinity.

Family, Fatherhood, and Intimate Relationships

Family change is frequently presented as evidence that men have become socially unnecessary, particularly where women possess independent incomes and legal autonomy. This conclusion

misunderstands fatherhood because the developmental contribution of fathers extends beyond financial provision to affection, discipline, teaching, identity formation, play, guidance, protection, cultural transmission, and emotional availability. A father's significance should not depend upon controlling his partner or functioning as the sole household authority. Contemporary fatherhood can combine provision with caregiving and can preserve responsibility, rejecting violence, intimidation, and emotional distance. UNDP's evaluation of programmes engaging men for gender equality identifies fatherhood, peer groups, holistic intervention, and faith-based organisations as important pathways for changing gender relations. Policies should consequently support paternal leave, responsible co-parenting, father-inclusive services, child-maintenance enforcement, relationship education, and fair opportunities for safe and involved fathers. Strong fatherhood is not threatened by women's equality but strengthened when paternal value rests upon dependable relationships rather than institutional dominance.

Relationship expectations have also changed because consent, emotional reciprocity, domestic equality, and freedom from abuse have acquired greater public legitimacy. Men accustomed to receiving care without providing it may interpret these changes as excessive demands; women may reject relationships that reproduce unequal labour or coercive authority. Conflict emerges where men are still judged by traditional expectations of income and protection but simultaneously expected to fulfil modern ideals of emotional communication and domestic participation. This double expectation can create gender-role strain, particularly for men with insecure employment or limited models of emotionally engaged fatherhood. Nevertheless, the appropriate response is not to restore women's dependence but to renegotiate obligations transparently and distribute paid and unpaid labour more fairly. Men require relational education that affirms boundaries, emotional competence, sexual ethics, conflict management, and self-respect without presenting masculinity as inherently dangerous. Women likewise should not reproduce expectations that men must be invulnerable, financially dominant, physically fearless, and emotionally available on demand.

Digital Media, Masculinist Backlash, and Identity Formation

Digital media have transformed how boys and men learn masculinity by replacing some local institutions with global networks of influencers, entrepreneurs, entertainers, political actors, athletes, and anonymous communities. Online spaces can provide mentorship, technical education, fitness support, emotional solidarity, career guidance, and positive discussions of fatherhood or male health. They can also exploit young men's loneliness, sexual frustration, unemployment, humiliation, and uncertainty by presenting misogyny, dominance, wealth, physical power, and emotional hardness as solutions. Algorithmically amplified content may transform legitimate grievances into hostility towards women, feminism, migrants, sexual minorities, or democratic institutions. The appeal of such content often lies not only in prejudice but also in its provision of identity, certainty, brotherhood, discipline, and an explanation for perceived failure. Responses based solely upon censorship or moral condemnation may deepen alienation when they offer no credible alternative route to status and belonging. Societies must therefore combine digital literacy and regulation with mentoring, employment opportunities, community participation, mental-health support, and compelling models of ethical masculinity.

The language of toxic masculinity requires similar precision because masculinity itself is not a toxin. The term is most useful when it identifies a cluster of practices involving domination, humiliation, aggression, misogyny, emotional suppression, compulsory heterosexuality, and dangerous risk-taking. It becomes counterproductive when used casually to describe male confidence, competitiveness, physical strength, sexual interest, disagreement, or traditional identity. Boys who hear only that masculinity is harmful may conclude that institutions dislike them, especially when their need for purpose, discipline, challenge, and recognition remains unmet. Conversely, abandoning criticism of patriarchal violence to protect men's feelings would neglect the harms experienced by women, children, sexual minorities, and other men. The appropriate scholarly position distinguishes masculine capacities from destructive masculine hierarchies and evaluates conduct according to its consequences rather than its gendered appearance. This distinction allows strength, competition, ambition, protection, and leadership to be cultivated within ethical limits.

Masculinity, Human Security, and Protection

Protection remains one of the most compelling foundations upon which many men construct moral identity. Firefighters, soldiers, police officers, builders, engineers, sailors, healthcare workers, emergency responders, fathers, community leaders, and ordinary citizens frequently accept personal risk to preserve life and social order. Such conduct demonstrates that masculinity can orient men towards sacrifice, endurance, public duty, and responsibility beyond individual gratification. Yet protective institutions can also cultivate masculinity contests in which weakness is concealed, overwork is celebrated, dissent is punished, and domination becomes proof of commitment. Contemporary organisational research links masculinity-contest cultures with expectations of toughness, stamina, dominance, and the suppression of vulnerability. Ethical institutions must preserve courage and operational discipline, allowing personnel to report trauma, fatigue, misconduct, and psychological distress. Protective masculinity is developmentally valuable when it safeguards life and justice, but dangerous when it treats control, violence, or silence as ends in themselves.

Security should also be expanded beyond physical defence to include economic, emotional, environmental, digital, and relational protection. A man who maintains a safe home, prevents abuse, mentors children, protects public resources, responds to climate emergencies, secures digital systems, or supports an ageing relative performs socially valuable protective labour. This broader definition is particularly important where technological and service economies reduce the visibility of traditional physical work. It permits men to sustain identities based upon usefulness and responsibility without requiring enemies, domination, or occupational danger. It also recognises that prevention, care, planning, and cooperation can be as protective as physical confrontation. Human development depends upon men who can anticipate risks, build resilient institutions, share knowledge, and protect the dignity of persons different from themselves. Masculinity therefore need not become weaker when protection is broadened, because its ethical and intellectual demands become more complex.

Methodology

This paper adopts a critical conceptual-review methodology rather than an empirical design based upon original participant data. The analysis synthesises scholarship from sociology, psychology, gender studies, education, public health, development studies, organisational research, and media studies. Foundational theories were examined alongside contemporary reports addressing men's health, boys' education, gender equality, caring masculinities, and the changing organisation of work and family. Particular attention was given to the assumptions embedded within claims that masculinity is either the foundation of civilisation or an inherently oppressive institution. The review uses interpretative comparison to distinguish biological, cultural, institutional, economic, and psychological explanations of masculine identity. It also evaluates whether evidence concerning particular populations can legitimately support universal conclusions about men. Because this is a conceptual paper, its conclusions should be treated as theoretically reasoned propositions requiring further cross-cultural and longitudinal empirical testing.

The analysis applies four critical principles to the literature. First, masculinity is treated as plural because no single model adequately represents all men or societies. Second, gender equality is not assumed to require male decline, and male wellbeing is not assumed to require female subordination. Third, individual behaviour is interpreted within institutions, recognising that schools, labour markets, healthcare systems, families, religions, and digital platforms shape available masculine identities. Fourth, developmental outcomes are evaluated according to health, education, dignity, capability, security, contribution, and relational wellbeing rather than dominance alone. These principles make it possible to acknowledge men's historic and contemporary contributions, avoiding male-centred accounts that erase women's labour. They also permit criticism of harmful masculine practices without defining masculinity itself as pathological.

Critical Discussion

The evidence does not support the proposition that masculinity is disappearing in any comprehensive sociological sense. Masculinity remains highly visible in politics, sport, military institutions, business, religion, technology, popular culture, family expectations, sexuality, and occupational organisation. What has weakened in many societies is the uncontested legitimacy of masculinity based upon male monopoly, compulsory breadwinning, emotional invulnerability, heterosexual dominance, and women's dependence. This transformation can feel threatening because social equality removes automatic recognition and requires men to negotiate respect through competence, character, relationships, and contribution. Yet a masculinity that survives only through women's exclusion is inherently fragile and poorly suited to democratic human development. Masculinity remains viable when it can adapt its practices, preserving meaningful values such as courage, responsibility, craftsmanship, service, perseverance, loyalty, protection, and disciplined achievement. The twenty-first century is therefore better characterised as an era of masculine contestation and reconstruction than as an era of masculine extinction.

At the same time, progressive scholarship and public policy must avoid treating men's difficulties as politically inconvenient or merely as reactions to lost privilege. Boys who disengage from school, men who lose attachment to work, fathers separated from children, isolated elderly men, incarcerated men, and men experiencing suicidal distress require direct institutional attention. Their problems cannot be solved through symbolic celebration of masculinity alone, but neither can they be solved by framing male identity as a social defect. Policy should distinguish between preserving hierarchy and preserving human beings, because rejecting patriarchy does not require indifference to male suffering. Gender-transformative work is most credible when men are engaged as participants whose wellbeing matters rather than merely as instruments for improving women's lives. UNDP's recent evaluation similarly recommends holistic approaches that move beyond individual attitude change and engage peer groups, fatherhood, organisations, and social institutions. A mature gender politics must be capable of addressing women's continuing disadvantages and men's emerging or neglected vulnerabilities simultaneously.

The concept of human development provides the most productive basis for reconciling these concerns. Development is enhanced when men and women possess capabilities to learn, work, care, create, participate, maintain health, form secure relationships, and contribute to society. It is weakened when either sex is confined to rigid roles, denied educational opportunity, exposed to violence, or treated as disposable. Men's physical labour, technical innovation, protective service, fatherhood, community leadership, and institutional contribution remain central to social continuity. Women's expanded participation does not erase those contributions but enlarges the total reservoir of human capability available to societies. The proper objective is therefore not to make men more like women or women more like men, but to remove unnecessary restrictions upon both, preserving identities that individuals find meaningful. Human development requires masculine identities capacious enough to include strength and vulnerability, autonomy and interdependence, provision and care, competition and cooperation, authority and accountability.

Policy and Practice Implications

Education systems should adopt gender-responsive strategies that address boys' literacy, disciplinary exclusion, developmental needs, vocational interests, mental health, and transitions into employment without returning to stereotypes about male incapacity for academic study. Schools should expose boys to diverse male role models, including teachers, tradesmen, scientists, nurses, artists, engineers, fathers, carers, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. Curricula should teach emotional regulation, respectful relationships, consent, digital literacy, practical competence, physical wellbeing, civic responsibility, and conflict resolution. Employment policy should expand apprenticeships, technical education, entrepreneurship support, lifelong learning, and dignified work in both traditional and emerging sectors. Health systems should develop male-sensitive outreach, maintaining evidence-based standards and avoiding assumptions that all men reject emotional discussion. Family policy should support active fatherhood, responsible co-parenting, child protection, paternal leave, and equitable treatment consistent with the safety and interests of children. These interventions would address men's needs through capability development rather than through the restoration of gender hierarchy.

Religious organisations, sports institutions, workplaces, media organisations, and community groups also possess significant influence over masculine development. Faith communities can frame protection, sacrifice, fatherhood, discipline, and leadership as forms of service rather than domination. Sports programmes can combine competition and physical development with emotional literacy, teamwork, respect, and accountability. Workplaces can preserve high standards while dismantling cultures that equate exhaustion, silence, bullying, and unnecessary risk with professional masculinity. Media producers should represent a wider range of men, including carers, responsible fathers, disabled men, working-class men, emotionally articulate leaders, and men who resolve conflict without violence. Gender-equality programmes should invite men into substantive dialogue, refusing narratives that blame women for economic restructuring or social isolation. The transformation of masculinity will be most successful when institutions provide credible models of belonging, contribution, achievement, and ethical recognition.

Limitations and Future Research

The principal limitation of this paper is that masculinity varies so extensively across cultures that no single conceptual review can represent all male experiences. Much influential masculinity scholarship originates in Europe, North America, and Australia, creating risks when its concepts are transferred uncritically to Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East, or Indigenous societies. Future studies should examine how colonialism, religion, migration, race, class, violence, economic dependency, climate change, and global media reshape local masculinities. Longitudinal research is also required to determine whether contemporary changes produce lasting transformations or temporary generational conflicts. Empirical work should compare men who experience gender equality as liberating with those who experience it as dispossession, humiliation, or cultural displacement. Researchers should develop multidimensional indicators of masculine wellbeing encompassing health, education, employment, family connection, social contribution, safety, purpose, and institutional trust. Such work would move debate beyond ideological claims towards evidence-based understanding of which masculinities support human flourishing.

Conclusion

Masculinity in the twenty-first century is neither a disappearing relic nor a timeless biological essence. It is a dynamic social system through which men interpret embodiment, work, relationships, protection, authority, care, status, responsibility, and belonging. Men's contributions to infrastructure, security, science, family life, religion, governance, technology, and economic development are extensive and deserve serious recognition. Those achievements, however, emerged through collective institutions and cannot justify the permanent subordination or exclusion of women. The evidence suggests that certain men and boys face genuine crises, particularly where educational failure, insecure work, poor health, social isolation, family disruption, and rigid masculine expectations converge. These conditions require deliberate policy responses rather than dismissal, romantic nostalgia, or resentment towards women's advancement. Masculinity is most plausibly under threat only when it is defined so narrowly that equality, care, emotional honesty, and shared authority become incompatible with being a man.

A developmentally sustainable masculinity must preserve the desire to protect, provide, construct, innovate, lead, persevere, and serve, separating these capacities from domination and emotional repression. It should enable men to derive dignity from responsible contribution rather than superiority over women or other men. Such masculinity would treat fatherhood as relational presence, strength as disciplined capability, protection as accountable service, and leadership as stewardship. It would also recognise that men require care, safety, education, healthcare, emotional connection, and institutional support rather than being valued only for productivity or sacrifice. The advancement of women need not destroy masculinity because human capacities are not finite resources distributed through a zero-sum gender contest. The greater danger lies in failing to provide boys and men with ethical, inclusive, and socially meaningful pathways into adulthood, allowing harmful online or political movements to monopolise their grievances. The future of masculinity therefore depends not upon restoring an unequal past, but upon constructing forms of manhood capable of contributing to equality, dignity, human security, and shared development.

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