



African Population and
Health Research Center
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**Spotlight
Initiative**
To eliminate violence
against women and girls

A Qualitative Explorative Study Report on the Roles of Positive Masculinities and Male Engagement in the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls in Malawi

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

APHRC	African Population and Health Research Centre
CSR	Centre for Social Research
DC	District Commissioner
ESARO	Eastern and Southern Africa Regional office
FGD	Focus Group Discussion.
GBV	Gender-Based Violence.
HPs	Harmful Practices
IDI	In-depth Interview
KII	Key Informant Interview
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
TA	Traditional Authority
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Masculinity: The prominent model used to define masculinity in a society or part of a society is a set of attributes, behaviors, and roles associated with men and boys. It has implications on how to be a man as well as male sexual desires and pleasures¹.

Positive Masculinity: is defined as a concept that challenges the narrow and harmful stereotypes of what it means to be masculine and promotes healthy behaviors, emotions, and values².

Gender-based violence: This can be defined as violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately³.

Violence against women and girls: Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women or girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life⁴.

Intimate partner violence: Behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behavior⁵.

Sexual and gender-based Violence: Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching, and other non-contact forms⁶.

Harmful Practices: These are persistent practices and behaviors that are grounded on discrimination based on sex, gender, age, and other grounds as well as multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering⁶.

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Executive Summary

Background

Programs aimed at ending VAWG are now increasingly engaging men and boys as stakeholders, participants, and change agents who could reach other men and bring about gender transformative changes. Emerging evidence has demonstrated that active and meaningful engagement of men and boys is key to achieving gender parity and building positive masculinity, as men play an important role in challenging the patriarchal beliefs and practices that disadvantage women in society. However, there is a need to further explore and establish how best the process of male engagement can be facilitated and supported to the full realization of gender equality between men and women. As such, an in-depth understanding of VAWG/positive masculinity interventions that engage men in gender transformative approaches is necessary and of priority to inform the design and implementation of similar interventions in different African contexts.

Study objective

This study aimed to explore the role of positive masculinities and male engagement in the elimination of VAWG in Malawi. The specific objectives were:

1. To document the views of stakeholders (policymakers, community leaders, members of the community, and program beneficiaries) regarding masculinity and its link to VAWG in Malawi.
2. To highlight the facilitators and barriers to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HPs.
3. To identify interventions or approaches considered most successful in enhancing the involvement of men and boys in initiatives to end/prevent VAWG/SGBV/HPs.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Machinga district, Southern Malawi between July 2023 and December 2023. It employed an explorative qualitative study design. Data were obtained through key informant interviews (n=10) with policymakers and program implementers, in-depth interviews (n=30) with community leaders, program beneficiaries (including 8 religious leaders), and focus group discussions (n=15) with community members. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

Findings

Conceptualizing masculinities

Study participants conceptualized a man through biological and sociological lens. Biological attributes like genitalia, beards, and broad chests were used to distinguish between men and women. Sociologically, a man is described through the socially ascribed gender roles. Traditional masculinity traits such as protector, provider, leader, hard work and independence were valued forms of manliness in the study setting and these attributes dominated participants' narratives. However, emerging masculinity traits such as showing love, respect, care, non-violence, and gender equality also emerged from the data as ideal forms of masculinity. While most participants believed that traditional masculinity traits are valued the most in the community, others observed a movement towards masculine traits that promoted gender equality, especially in urban areas. Negative manifestations of masculinity included being violent, sexual infidelity, gambling, abusing alcohol, and failing to live up to traditional manhood norms. While real men were said to provide and care for their families and community, men who were abusive to their wives and those who squandered family resources on gambling, alcohol, and prostitution were termed as weak. Participants indicated that if negative masculinities were rooted out of their community, then both men and women would live in harmony.

Masculinity norms and VAWG

Key informants reported that the hegemonic masculinity beliefs—which hold that males are superior to and should dominate women—are the primary reason why men perpetrate VAWG. Religious and cultural teachings serve to uphold this hegemonic masculine standard with men resorting to violence as a means of dominance and control over women. Despite its physical and psychological harm to women, several participants recounted that VAWG is normalized in their communities with some justifying VAWG in some instances such as disobeying the husband and infidelity. By being treated as subordinates, women and girls are disempowered and at risk of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Gender and cultural norms that view men as providers and decision-makers encourage women to stay in abusive marriages for their children's sake, and thus women do not report acts of domestic violence to authorities. Unreported cases of domestic violence cannot be acted upon by law enforcement authorities, which may lead to the normalization of VAWG.

Facilitators for harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HPs

Study participants reflected on ways to harness positive masculinity to eradicate VAWG including; raising awareness in community meetings/gatherings with men; sharing lessons about positive masculinity and VAWG through the use of drama and arts; using male champions to spread ideas about positive masculinity to males to gain traction with men and boys and; utilizing community-based institutions and structures that promote meetings of males, such as youth clubs, chiefs' forums, churches, and mosques.

Barriers to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HPs

Participants in the study emphasized the difficulties of harnessing positive masculinity to eradicate VAWG. Factors such as poverty, illiteracy, men's lack of interest in participating in community meetings and social activities that address VAWG, inadequate funding for large-scale interventions that promote positive masculinity and engage men and boys in ending VAWG, and strongly ingrained hegemonic masculinity norms that are supported by religious and cultural teachings hamper efforts to change inequitable gender beliefs and promote positive masculinity.

Interventions involving men and boys in ending VAWG

The Spotlight Initiative national program's barbershop toolbox was identified as a successful project that involved men and boys in ending VAWG. The barber shop toolbox intervention was linked to perceptions, attitudinal, and behavioral changes, better awareness and comprehension of all forms of violence, where to report it, and where to get help. The success of the intervention was attributed to its use of male role models to engage with men and boys as beneficiaries could relate with them and embrace more gender-equitable views. The program implementers noted a decline in the number of domestic violence cases reported to the authorities and attributed this to the intervention's success. Village chiefs and religious leaders confirmed the program's positive impact by stating that they no longer approved or officiated child marriages.

Conclusion

Traditional masculinity expressed through benevolent patriarchy, leadership, hard work, and independence, was a valued and desirable form of manliness in the study setting. Men who deviated from this definition of manliness were viewed as less manly, and so were those who perpetuated violence, gambled, committed adultery, or abused alcohol. Positive masculinity was construed to embody traits such as compassion, love, respect, non-violence, and gender equality. Although the community has structures like the Chief's Forum, Churches, Mosques, and Youth Corners that can be used to harness positive masculinity to end VAWG, obstacles like ignorance, poverty, insufficient funding, men's disinterest, and deeply ingrained unequal gender norms restrict efforts and impede progress. Interventions such as the barber shop toolbox, which trained male champions and traditional/religious leaders, were considered promising in raising awareness about positive masculinity and bringing about attitudinal and behavioral changes needed to end VAWG.

Recommendations for male engagement in ending VAWG

The following are key considerations when designing interventions on male engagement in ending VAWG.

1. Co-develop positive masculinity interventions with men and boys.
2. Create more safe spaces and clubs for men and boys to meet.
3. Integrate empowerment and sporting programs into positive masculinity interventions.
4. Reporting VAWG cases and enforcing the law.
5. Work with traditional and religious leaders.
6. Increase funding for positive masculinity interventions.



INTRODUCTION

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a pervasive global public health problem, more so, in the African region. In 2021, the WHO estimated that about 30% (1 in 3) of women had been subjected to some form of violence globally, with most of these survivors being women aged 15–49 years (1). Violence against women and girls is widespread in Malawi, with 42.2% of women reporting having ever experienced intimate partner violence, and 32.7% in the past year (2). About 5% of women experienced violence during pregnancy (2). One in five females had experienced sexual violence compared to one in seven males before turning 18 (3).

The effects of violence on women's and girls' health and welfare, their families, and communities are substantial. Violence exposes women and girls to severe health and social challenges, including HIV, unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion, maternal morbidity, and deaths (4–6). VAWG results in injuries, gynecological disorders, and emotional and mental disorders (7). It creates an unstable family environment (8). VAWG also poses broader socio-economic challenges.

The economic costs of VAWG include i) Out-of-pocket expenses such as costs associated with hospital stays or damaged/destroyed assets in the home; ii) Opportunity costs from missing paid or unpaid work, and for husband/partner missing work; and iii) productivity loss for the economy of the country. Violence also results in transgenerational trauma as studies have shown that boys who witness domestic violence are more likely to become perpetrators (9, 10). The pervasive nature of

VAWG demands urgent action to promote and facilitate its elimination as articulated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5)—achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

While the importance of addressing cultural norms and practices that drive VAWG is well known, the need to engage men and boys to address this is imperative. Programs aimed at the elimination of VAWG—also known as positive masculinity⁷ interventions— are now increasingly engaging men and boys as stakeholders and participants in gender transformative approaches. Emerging evidence has demonstrated that active and meaningful engagement with men and boys is essential in achieving gender parity and building positive masculinity, as men play an important role in challenging the patriarchal beliefs and practices that disadvantage women in society (11). This is also an important strategy to transform community perceptions of VAWG (12). Well-designed interventions with men and boys that employ gender transformative approaches to promote gender equitable relationships have proven to be more effective in influencing positive behavior change and attitude transformation towards VAWG/GBV(13).

Although limited studies exist, there is a clear indication of successful male engagement or the potential and impacts of the program-level efforts to engage men and boys to achieve gender equality and transform their attitudes towards gender equality for the prevention of VAWG. However, there is a need to further explore how best the process of male engagement can be facilitated and supported to the full realization of gender equality between men and women. As such, in-depth understanding of VAWG/positive masculinity interventions that engage men in gender transformative approaches is necessary and of priority to inform the design and implementation of similar interventions in different African contexts.

Study objectives

This study aimed to explore the role of positive masculinities and male engagement in the elimination of VAWG in Malawi. The specific objectives were:

1. To explore stakeholders' (policymakers, community leaders, community members, and program beneficiaries) perspectives on masculinity and its link to VAWG in Malawi.
2. To highlight the barriers and facilitators to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HPs in Malawi.
3. To identify interventions or approaches perceived to be most effective in enhancing the involvement of men and boys in programs to end/prevent violence against women and girls/SGBV/HPs in Malawi.

Theoretical Framework

This research draws from the socio-ecological framework to understand how positive masculinity impacts VAWG; and how male engagement could be a useful programmatic approach to eliminating VAWG. An ecological approach emphasizes the role of context in influencing behavior and looks at the individual, the individual's environment, and the interactions of the individuals with their environment and vice versa. The framework refers to the context in four nested aspects of the ecosystem—micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems. Microsystems are the patterns of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations with family, peers, and partners that influence behavior. The interactions between the micro-systems to influence beliefs and behaviors create the mesosystem. Mesosystems are mainly referred to as the “linkages and processes taking place between two or more

⁷ Positive masculinity entails behaviors and traits that embody respect, empathy, non-violence, emotional intelligence, leadership and support gender equality

settings”. Exo-systems refer to structures that impact one’s behavior indirectly through interacting with microsystems and may include neighborhood contexts and community norms. The macro-systems refer to broad structures, such as culture, religious affiliations, ethnicity, laws and policies, and education systems that police behaviors. Using the socio-ecological approach is important in understanding the different levels and layers of interactions that influence masculinities and that are important in designing and implementing positive masculinity programs aimed at ending VAWG.



METHODS

Study Design

We adopted a qualitative exploratory design to gain an in-depth understanding of positive masculinity given this is a relatively new concept in the study setting. The study employed three qualitative data collection methods: key informant interviews (KII) with relevant national and district-level policymakers and program implementers; focus group discussions primarily with project stakeholders including beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries at the community level; and In-depth interviews (IDI) with program beneficiaries and community leaders. In-person interviews were conducted with a purposively sampled study population selected from the Southern region of Malawi. The study was carried out between July 2023 to December 2023.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Machinga District, which is one of the six districts in Malawi where there were notable projects that engaged men and boys in ending VAWG such as the Spotlight Initiative Barber Shop Toolbox and Girl's Safe Spaces programs.

Study population and participant selection

The study population included positive masculinity program beneficiaries, community members (men, women, and the youth), community and religious leaders, representatives of community-based organizations, local government administration officials, and national-level policymakers and program implementers. All these diverse groups of individuals were included in the study to ensure rich data were collected to answer study objectives. Each category of interviewee had unique insights on masculinities and their link to VAWG in the community, while program beneficiaries and implementers provided insights on positive masculinity programs being implemented and changes recorded that were attributable to these programs. Community leaders were purposively selected from the rural and urban communities based on their key roles as cultural and religious leaders, leaders of community-

based organizations, and local government administration officials. They provided information on male engagement and positive masculinity interventions in their areas as well as information on masculinity, VAWG/SGBV, and HPs.

Community members were identified with the help of the community leaders and considering their active participation in community activities. We selected a diverse group of community members including boys and girls aged 15 to 17 and adult males and females with ages ranging from 18 to 76 years and from rural and urban areas. A total of 104 community members took part in the study, 56 were females, and 48 were males. Key informants were purposively identified based on their roles in formulating policies or implementing programs related to gender, women's rights, or engaging men in the elimination of VAWG and harmful practices. A total of 13 key informants were included, five were males and eight were females. The beneficiaries were recruited with the help of program implementers who engage men in the elimination of VAWG and harmful practices and the promotion of women's rights. The beneficiaries were women and men aged 18 years or older who were targeted by programs that support male engagement in the elimination of VAWG and the promotion of women's rights. Specifically, there were four religious' leaders (pastors and sheikhs) and 9 male champions who were trained through the barbershop toolbox. In addition, nine female beneficiaries were mentors and mentees under the Girl's Safe Spaces program.

Table 1: Overview of study participants

Method	Group	Participants Gender		Number of participants per interview/FGD location			
		Male	Female	Sitola	Mlomba	Nsanama	Kawinga
FGDs	15-17 years (n=5)	20	17	16	6	9	6
	18-24 years (n=3)	10	16	16		10	
	25-34 years (n=2)	6	7		7		6
	35-45 years (n=2)	6	8	6		8	
	46 years or older (n=3)	6	8		6		8
KIs	National level government (n=2)		2				
	District-level government and NGO officers (n=5)	4	1	2	1		2
	Chiefs Forum representative (n=1)	1					1
	Community-based child protection workers (n=2)	1	1	1			1
IDIs	Community Leaders (chiefs) (n=8)	5	3	2	2	2	2
	Program Beneficiaries (n=22)	13	9	6	7	3	6
	Total	71	73	34	29	31	30

Ethical Considerations

The University of Malawi Research Ethics Committee approved the study's protocol (UNIMAREC, protocol no.: P.11/22/203). Before beginning data collection, permission was obtained from the appropriate district-level authorities (such as the District Commissioner and District Social Welfare Office). We conducted community entry by obtaining permission to conduct the study from relevant Traditional Authorities and community leaders before the start of data collection. To minimize any potential risk stemming from participation, every member of the project team received rigorous training in research ethics before the onset of data collection. Prior to their involvement in the study, all participants provided written informed consent.

Each participant was informed about the purpose of the study, and the expected benefits and potential risks of their involvement in the study as part of the informed consent process. For minors, consent was first obtained from parents or guardians. When granted, assent was obtained from the minors themselves. Additional consent and signatures were obtained for the audio recording of interviews. To ensure comprehension, the consenting process was conducted in Chichewa. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw their consent to participate in the study at any time without facing consequences, or to choose not to participate at all. Participation was voluntary. Every interview was conducted in a comfortable setting where the participants' confidentiality and privacy were protected.

Only the project team had access to all raw data, which was secured as confidential. The electronic copies of the data had no participant names or addresses or other identifiable information.

Data Collection

Eight bilingual field researchers conducted the interviews. The field researchers were trained on interview techniques, the study scope and objectives, the consenting process, and research ethics. They also reviewed the interview guide and conducted mock interviews to ensure they comprehended the survey guides. A pre-test was conducted with all the interview guides to ensure the interviewees could comprehend the questions and the survey procedures.

Focus Group Discussions with Community Members

Focus group discussions (FGD) with community members were conducted face-to-face and sought to understand the prevailing views on masculinity and the engagement of men in programs to end VAWG and promote women's rights. Each FGD comprised six to ten participants and was conducted by two researchers with training in qualitative data collection (one facilitator and one note-taker). On average, the FGDs lasted between one hour and fifteen minutes and were conducted in the Chichewa language.

In-depth Interviews with Community Leaders

In-depth interviews (IDIs) with community leaders were conducted face-to-face. These IDIs explored views of community members on masculinities, VAWG, and programs involving men to end VAWG. On average, the IDIs lasted about 1 hour and were conducted in Chichewa. The interviewers ensured that the chosen locations guaranteed privacy to the interviewees.

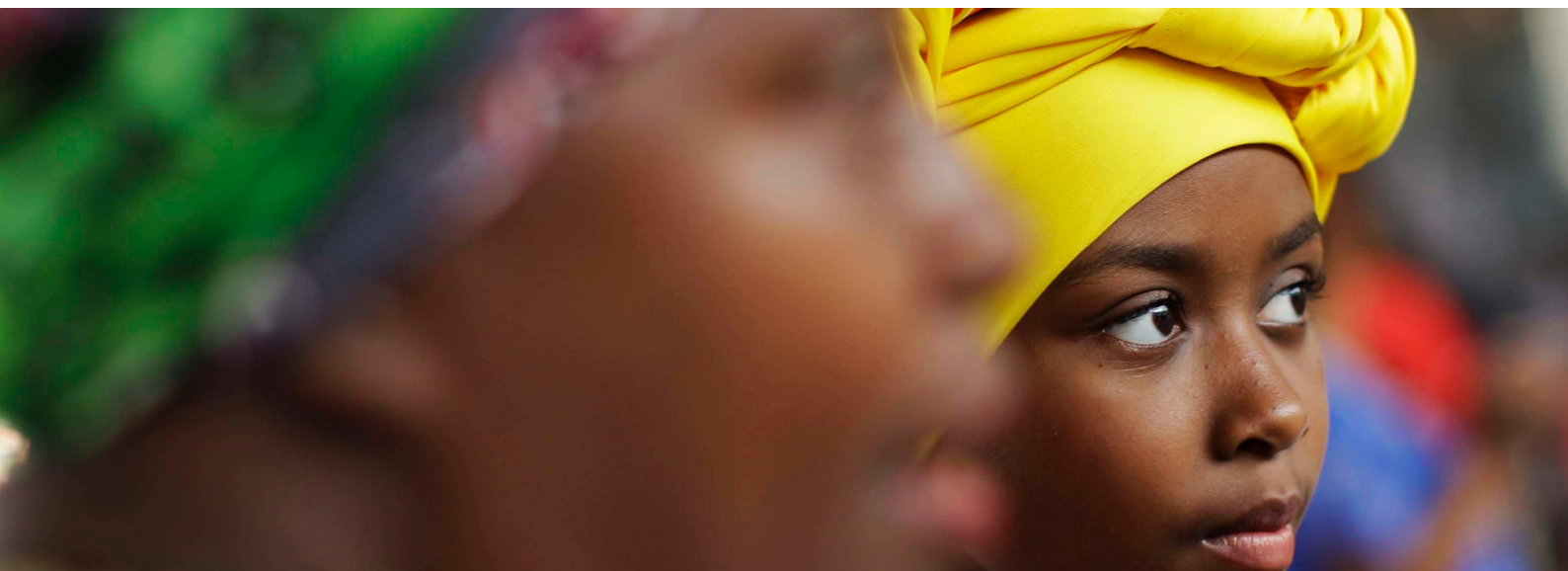
Key Informant Interviews with Policy Makers and Program Implementers

Key informant interviews (KIs) were conducted face-to-face where feasible; otherwise, they were conducted over the phone, especially for national-level actors who are based in Lilongwe. The KIs sought to understand best practices and challenges in harnessing positive masculinities and engaging men in programs aimed at eliminating VAWG and promoting the rights of women. Researchers contacted the key informants by phone then briefly explained the study and asked if they were in an environment that allowed for private conversation. Once a conducive environment was confirmed, interviewers read the informed consent document to the participants and asked them to verbally indicate their willingness to participate in the research. On average, KIs lasted 1 hour 10 minutes and were conducted either in English or Chichewa depending on the participants' preferences. *In-depth Interviews with Beneficiaries.*

In-depth interviews (IDIs) with program beneficiaries were conducted face-to-face. The IDIs explored the extent to which programs that promote positive masculinities and male engagement in ending VAWG and promoting women's rights contribute to improving knowledge and behavioral change. On average each IDI lasted one hour and was conducted in Chichewa. Most IDIs took place at the respondent's homes or locations that were convenient for the participants.

Data processing

All interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission. Bilingual translators translated the data into English verbatim. Data were cleaned and edited before being imported into the NVivo software for coding. Thematic content analysis was used in analyzing the data. It involved reflexive reading of transcripts, coding, and developing a list of emerging themes. Once coding was completed, we looked for patterns and associations between the codes and themes, and compared and contrasted them within and between the different groups of participants. Investigators first reviewed a few transcripts to identify and develop a coding framework that was used to code all the transcripts. New codes that emerged during coding were categorized separately. Coding of transcripts was undertaken by at least two investigators, and any disagreements on the categorization of codes were resolved through discussions among all investigators. Emerging codes were grouped into themes forming the findings of the study.



STUDY FINDINGS

The study's findings are organized in this section based on the major themes and study objectives. The respondents' perspectives on masculinities and how they manifest at various socio-ecological levels are discussed first. This is followed by a section on expressions of negative masculinity as well as its link to VAWG. We then present findings on barriers and facilitators for harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HP. Lastly, we present findings on policy and programmatic interventions, the impact of these interventions, and respondents' recommendations for male engagement in ending VAWG.

Conceptualizing Masculinities

The findings on interviewees' perceptions of manliness and how manliness is expressed in the community are presented in this subsection. These findings are discussed under biological or social attributes. The behavioral attributes are subcategorized into individual, household, and community expressions of manliness based on the socio-ecological model.

Biological construction of masculinity

Several interviewees stressed the differences between the male sex and the female sex and the physical and biological attributes of a man. They emphasized the fundamental physical characteristics that set men and women apart, such as genitalia, beards, and broad chests. One key informant summarized it as follows:

"In our culture and creation, there is a difference between a man and a woman based on body parts that a person has. We can be similar in other ways but there are a few things that differentiate a man from a woman. Firstly, private parts. The second is breast. A woman has breasts while a man has no breasts. The third thing is that a man has many beards, while women, some can have but few, but a woman doesn't have beards..." (KII Policymaker 66-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

Social construction of masculinity

Most interviewees maintained that traditional masculinity traits were the most desirable and ideal representation of masculinity in their communities. However, positive masculinity traits like love, respect, caring, non-violence, and gender equality are emerging valued forms of masculinity. Using the socio-ecological model as a framework, we discussed the masculinity traits portrayed by interviewees, emphasizing how masculinity is performed at the individual, family, and community levels.

Individual-level expressions

(i) Hard work and independence

Individual-level traditional masculinity attributes such as strength, hard effort, and independence were expressed by the participants as desirable qualities in a man. Participants in the majority of the interviews argued that a real man should not be a slacker and should be able to support himself financially. The following quotation offers a brief overview of this viewpoint:

“A real man is supposed to be hardworking and strong, despite the challenges that may arise. He may also seek help from another person because there are certain circumstances in which one may need help. Not in the form of money, but advice that the person can use” (FGD participant, 18-24-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

The participants noted that an indolent man is a weak man, a slob who is unworthy of the title “man.” A man is expected to be strong and tough, attributes that drive men to be more violent and resort to aggression as a first solution when faced with challenges and confrontations. It should be noted was closely associated with the capacity to fulfill the role of a provider. Failure to provide was said to have grave consequences for one’s children. One interviewee captured this very well in his response:

“A man should be a hard worker. Because children can go astray based on how the home is. If they lack food, they may end up begging, others share their clothes because he is not buying clothes for them. That’s his role” (IDI Village Head, 65-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

(ii) Exemplary, responsible and honest

According to some participants in the study, a man as an individual should be exemplary, responsible, and honest. Being forthright and candid is seen as an ideal portrayal of masculinity at home and in the community. In addition to being honest, a man should be supportive of community initiatives:

“Besides that, a real man should show a good example to the community and in his household. He should be of a good character in all his doings, and he should like community development activities in the area, that one is what we call a real man” (IDI Village Head, 51-year-old female, Machinga, rural).

Household and community levels

This section presents the expressions of manliness that respondents perceive to operate at the household and community levels. The most prominent of these traits were advisory roles, leadership and decision-making, provision, love, respect and care, community participation, and abstaining from promiscuity, violence, and polygamy.

i) Leadership

Leadership is a key tenet of hegemonic masculinity. According to participants, men are viewed in Malawian communities as natural leaders, problem solvers, brave, and responsible. Men are expected to be leaders and decision-makers at household and community levels. Leadership mainly entails providing guidance, especially in the context of emerging challenges. The quotes below exemplify such sentiments:

“A real man should be a fast thinker depending on the situation at hand within his family or the community regardless of the time of the day. He should be able to provide answers to the emerging problems. For instance, the provision of food. Being called a man is very powerful for us men, so one needs not to be “short-sighted”. When problems emerge, he should be able to make decisions that will not affect the family or community in the future” (FGD participant 35-45-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

As one FGD participant stated, men should lead through their display of bravery. When there is a medical emergency at night, men present should provide means of transporting the sick to the hospital. For some, being a leader meant more than just giving instructions; it also meant having the ability to settle disputes amicably within the family.

“He should be the leader when doing anything at home. When there are differences at home, he should always resolve them without getting involved in fights” (IDI Program beneficiary, 45-year-old male Machinga, rural).

Leadership also required cooperation and despite being the heads of their families, men still need to consult their wives when making household decisions per modern trends, as seen in the illustration from a focus group discussion below:

“What my friends have said is the absolute truth. Also, considering the trend these days, even though we are the leaders in the home, there is a need for us to be united. As we are leading the household, we are supposed to agree with the wife. We should do things together.” (FGD Participant, 46+-year-old male, Machinga rural).

ii) Provision

The ability to provide is valued as an ideal masculinity trait in Malawi and the inability to provide makes men to be viewed as weak and unmanly. A real man is a breadwinner in a family, a benevolent patriarch. He is expected to provide his family with their basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing, security, and education among others. This expectation stands regardless of whether a man is in monogamous or polygamous marriage.

One female key informant alluded to this in her response:

“...in the context of Machinga, men who can feed the community or the household, are regarded as real men because they can support their household. They can provide basic needs like shelter, and food.” (KII Policy maker, 66-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

iii) Avoids promiscuity, sexual and physical violence

While hegemonic masculinity is characterized by sexual prowess, conquest, and multiple sexual partners, several participants, –especially women–view sexual fidelity as a valued expression of masculinity within the community. Hegemonic masculinity often results in men using violence to obtain sex from women and is considered one of the drivers of sexual violence. However, participants envisioned an ideal man as someone who shuns promiscuity and sexual and physical violence. In several interviews, participants were quick to say that a real man does not have multiple sexual partners in rejection of hegemonic masculinity. “A real man does not sexually abuse his biological or stepdaughters,” said one respondent. Also, many participants perceived a real man as a peacemaker and someone who resolves conflicts through diplomatic means. A real man not only avoids violence but also takes up the responsibility of preventing and reporting acts of violence. One interviewee’s response illustrates this assertion:

“In a community, if a man sees that somewhere things are not good and violent things are happening like a fellow man is being violent towards a woman, a man is abusing others, a real man must look into those cases and expose the act so that people can get help” (IDI Program beneficiary, 22-year-old female, Machinga, rural).

iv) Contributes to community development

Manliness for some is also expressed at the community level through one’s contributions to community development, including common good activities such as taking part in school construction projects and building tombstones. Employing a gender lens, the findings seem to portray that men are more inclined towards masculine tasks such as molding bricks (that are either paid or non-paid) and digging. Real men are said to be interested in community development and respond to chiefs’ calls for participation in community development activities. The quote below illustrates the foregoing:

“There are a lot of development activities that happen in a community. A real man is supposed to participate in such activities. For instance, we are called to assist in community development works like the construction of schools and other responsibilities that men do within their communities and families. Men are supposed to develop their families just like they develop their communities. For instance, farming to be able to feed his family” (IDI Program beneficiary, 44-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

v) Embraces gender equality

In a departure from traditional masculinity norms, participants’ narratives illustrate the endorsement of positive masculinity traits such as respecting the rights of women and girls (including reproductive rights), healthcare support and involvement (accompanying one’s wife to the hospital, getting tested for HIV, and taking sick children to clinics), supporting wife’s education, and taking up domestic chores (cooking, cleaning, and chopping firewood), thus embracing more gender equitable norms. However, participants viewed this transition as an expression of ideal masculinity, commonly noted in urban

areas whereas in rural areas, traditional gender roles are reinforced. One interviewee, however, added a caveat that men should take up domestic chores when the woman is preoccupied with other tasks. The excerpt below alluded to our findings on men taking up domestic chores:

“... if the woman is busy with other things, men take over other responsibilities like the splitting of firewood or sweeping the compound and/or relieving the woman of some other duties that she may feel burdened with.” (KII Program implementer, 22-year-old Female, Machinga, rural)

vi) Love, respect, and care for the family and neighbors

Another expression of manliness is through the showing of love, respect, and care for one's family and neighbors. As an expression of love, a real man should be understanding, lenient, protective, considerate, and should encourage children's education. Beyond that, real men are to shun favoritism and ensure the equal treatment of children within the family regardless of gender or disability. A real man is also supposed to have self-respect and respect others. Respect, love, and empathy are considered positive expressions of masculinity by study participants.

“They should trust him by looking at how he respects himself, the things that he does for the family, and his behavior which makes people trust in him and say, “We have a father in this house.” He shouldn't bring things that will cause disappointment” (IDI Program beneficiary, 45-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

Love, respect, and care also imply that a man should not be feared at home. In its extreme form, men who are feared at home are referred to as Tiger or Pilate. Family members are always cautious around such men and warn each other when such men are approaching.

“They mean “Here comes Lion!” The man is no longer acknowledged because of his behavior; his name is replaced with that of an animal. When he's coming, he is considered something used to scare others off. In that way, people don't live in peace” (IDI Program beneficiary, 45-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

Negative masculinity

This section presents findings on how negative masculinity is expressed in the community. The majority of the responses were the antithesis of what had been presented in the previous section. Manifestations of negative masculinities include being violent, sexually immoral, and abusive, neglecting household responsibilities, gambling, and abusing alcohol.

i) Violence perpetration, sexual immorality, gambling, and alcohol abuse

There was a consensus among study participants that violence perpetration is a negative expression of masculinity. Men who abuse their wives sexually, physically, emotionally, and economically are regarded as weak. One participant explained that sexual coercion by men against their wives diminishes their autonomy and deprives them of their sexual and reproductive health rights, especially in childbearing decisions.

The quote below illustrates negative masculinities that operate in this context.

“Some men beat their wives. Also the household population increases because the women may be getting pregnant and giving birth out of fear and/or are prevented from using contraceptives” (IDI Village head, 56-year-old male, Machinga, rural)

Negative portrayals of masculinity were seen through economic abuse (to their wives), failure to listen, failure to provide, and squandering family resources on gambling, alcohol, and prostitution. Such behaviors deny families livelihood, including food, and cause mental distress to the wives. Men who philander are likely to get infected with sexually transmitted diseases and in turn, infect their wives.

“It can be possible that we cultivate together maybe groundnuts or rice but since he is the head of the family and he is the one who makes decisions whether to cultivate and sell. And when he says we should sell the products, you leave everything for him since he is the head of the family and he is coming back home with nothing, meaning he has given the money to a prostitute yet he has left the woman with no food, she doesn’t have wrappers and this is another form of abuse because the woman does count on the money yet he is coming back with nothing yet they have worked together, that’s another form of abuse.” (FGD Participant, 16-17-year-old female, Machinga, rural)

Marrying underage girls was termed as a negative manifestation of masculinity in Malawi. Girls under 18 are children, with no legal capacity to make marital decisions. When married early, they are at increased risk of physical and socioeconomic harm, including sexual abuse, and fistula. Worryingly, weak men appear to have normalized child marriages:

“Men marrying a girl who is under the age of 18 years see no problem, yet that girl is sexually abused. That girl might be affected negatively in so many ways considering that she’s not yet mature and not ready to get involved in sexual activities. Some of the problems that she might face include fistula. Therefore, marrying an underage girl is also a manifestation of negative masculinity because that girl is being abused” (KII Program implementer, 24-year-old female, Machinga, urban).

Gambling, fighting, and alcohol abuse are other expressions of negative masculinity in the study settings. Men who abuse alcohol often do so at the expense of adequately providing for their families. They often leave the duty of provision to their wives, neglecting their provider roles. Gambling results in fights causing physical injuries that drain resources and unsettle the communities. One female respondent who was convinced that if gambling were to stop, things would get better in her community, articulated this in her response:

“Okay alright, they can be involved in a fight, having a misunderstanding, gambling, those things may portray that particular area’s masculinity. I: what do you mean by the term gambling? P: in English, they call it a gambling game, they have a circle like the way I am showing you, then they put their money together and play, so only one person may win the money and the other whose money has ended may request to borrow and if he refuses, they may end up fighting and hurting each other. If this gambling game is to stop, things would be better because most of the negative masculinities arise from the same” (IDI Program beneficiary, 23-year-old female, Machinga, rural).

ii) Neglects household responsibilities and does not care for or provide for the family

Men who fail to fulfill their traditional masculinity roles as providers are deemed as weak. Such men are described as lazy, idle, and unproductive and rely on their wives to meet their needs.

“He is always lazy, he is always sleepy, he is always abusive, a drunkard, instead of him looking for work, he relies on his wife to search for food for him to eat. That’s how a weak man is defined” (FGD participant, 18-24 female, Machinga, urban).

iii) Does not cooperate or listen to people’s advice

Negative masculinity is also portrayed through a lack of cooperation and failure to listen to others. This is largely manifested at the household level where men fail to take into account the views and needs of their wives. Respondents articulated the following:

“Negative masculinity is shown when the man does not want to be questioned by his wife. Even the woman finds it difficult to question the man. He is always in a bad mood and/or does not come near the family. Women in such marriages do things forcibly to avoid disputes” (IDI Village head, 56-year-old male, Machinga, rural)

Masculinity and VAWG

Key informants opined that at the root of men’s perpetration of VAWG is the hegemonic masculinity beliefs that men are superior to women and as such should dominate women. Male dominance was reinforced through cultural norms and religious teachings. Men used violence as a tool for control and domination and reasserting their dominant position relative to women. Several participants recounted that VAWG was normalized in their communities despite its physical and psychological harm to women. Some participants justified wife beating in certain instances such as when the wife neglects their husband’s advice, or in cases of sexual infidelity within the marriage.

“Like you are married, and you leave your husband, going out with side men, if your husband finds out about this, he can do anything violently to you like to beat you” (FGD participant, 18-24 female, Machinga, rural).

Payment of bride price, a cultural practice mainly in northern Malawi, is also viewed as propagating VAWG. The practice makes men perceive their wives as their property and therefore, can do whatever they desire to their wives including emotional, physical, and sexual violence. One program implementer explained this point in the key informant interview:

“if the man says a woman is a property because of the lobola (bride price) that is paid, like in the Northern region, ... he feels like he can do whatever he wants to do, he can abuse the woman the way he wants to; I can talk about marital rape here, we had examples of women telling us [what men say] here that; ‘I paid lobola (bride price) for you, there is nothing that you can tell me, you are going to give me sex, it doesn’t matter whether you are not feeling like it, whether you are feeling sick, whether you are in your periods I can do whatever I want because I bought you and you are my property” (KII Project/ program planner, 29-year-old female, Lilongwe urban).

Other participants indicated that VAWG resulted from men's abuse of alcohol, lack of love and consideration for the wife, feelings of insecurity, and lack of self-control. Key informants further expressed that women's decision-making is compromised by their partner's insecurities. Men were said to fear that their women's participation in businesses or associations with friends might result in bad influence and promiscuity. One key informant articulated the following:

“Most of the time, women are not allowed to do business on their own. Moving around, going in their fellow women groups, by saying they will learn prostitution because we believe that if they go and meet their friends, they will be discussing prostitution but it's not like that. We infringe on them instead of going there and getting new knowledge, we deny them. Even if a boy is in courtship with a girl, that girl is found to be walking with another boy, they say they are in intimacy while it is not. Moving along with another boy doesn't mean they do sex” (KII Policy maker, 66-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

Violence against women and girls often goes unreported to authorities because of the fear of threats from perpetrators and fear of losing their marriage as well as child support. Women are, culturally, socialized to persevere in their marriages for the sake of their children, and divorce is not tolerated. Arrest, jail, or divorce results in men's lack of resources to provide basic needs for their families, condemning them to a lifetime of poverty. Failure to report such cases increases the likelihood of violence occurring often. Similarly, cases of child defilement go unreported for the same reasons:

“so a man would rape his stepchild, a man who is 45 years old and the child 6 years old but the woman would tell the child not to tell anyone including their neighbors in fear of getting the man arrested and the woman and children suffering since the man is the breadwinner. (IDI Program beneficiary, 23-year-old female, Machinga, rural)

When domestic violence cases go unreported, police are unable to enforce the law:

“Police may not respond to domestic violence because some men threaten their wives not to report or risk losing their marriage and child support. So women end up not reporting, especially to maintain child support. So if no one reports to the police, the police will not know and therefore cannot act on something they do not know” (FGD participant, 35- 45 male, Machinga, rural).

Facilitators for harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HPs

As indicated in previous sections, masculinity norms are learned through socialization. While participants maintained that traditional masculinity traits are valued in the community, some have observed a shift towards positive masculinity traits like gender equality, non-violence, and respect, particularly in urban areas. Because masculinity norms are learned through socialization, experts believe that it is possible to teach men and boys to embrace positive masculinity. Positive masculinity programs are based on the premise that it is possible to dissuade men from negative masculinity and encourage them to embrace positive masculinity. Study participants reflected on how to harness positive masculinity to end VAWG during the interviews. Several facilitators for harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HPs were identified from the analysis of their responses. Mostly, the facilitators broadly centered around the change in social norms and current efforts to propagate and catalyze change.

a) Awareness campaigns

Study participants opined that positive masculinity can be harnessed through awareness creation such as during community meetings/gatherings with men. In addition, drama and arts can be used to reach young men with positive masculinity messages at household and community levels. As populations in Machinga become increasingly aware of their rights and the rights of others, they also facilitate the adoption of positive masculinity norms. Potential perpetrators of violence are aware of the rights of others and are also fearful of the consequences of infringing upon those rights. A culture of reporting incidents of violence has also developed.

“Every group that you have mentioned is told where to report such cases. Could be to the community leaders, other leaders, to the police, or anywhere. We have established that as our culture, to say when you are subjected to violence you know where to report your issues. When we do that, that community will have peace and better culture” (IDI Village head, 74-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

Various avenues for the proliferation of awareness messages have developed including participation in men’s “barbershops”, youth clubs, and other avenues of peer education. These and other clubs that spread awareness messages have been facilitating the harnessing of positive masculinity toward the elimination of VAWG, GBV, and HP.

b) Male champions

Study participants reiterated that having male champions is key to harnessing positive masculinity to end VAWG. Such was observed in projects such as the barbershop toolbox project where the presence of male champions facilitated the harnessing of positive masculinities. These male champions spread messages on positive masculinity and ending VAWG, SGBV, and HP to men and boys. The male champions were trained to deliver messages in places where men and boys meet such as barbershops.

c) Youth clubs

Youth clubs can create avenues for targeting many young people with messages on positive masculinity and ending VAWG. In Machinga, the presence of youth clubs provided a platform for spreading messages on positive masculinity. Youth clubs are convenient peer learning avenues. Participants stated that youth clubs were leveraged to promote positive masculinities toward the elimination of VAWG, GBV, and HPs by channeling discussions toward these issues without necessitating the creation of independent structures. Given youth clubs are widespread, positive masculinity messages reached several youths. However, challenges such as non-attendance to youth clubs remained.

“Like in youth club, we discuss so many things, how to lead a family and so many things about VAWG. But not everyone can attend youth club” (FGD Participant, 15-17-years-old male, Machinga, rural).

d) Chiefs’ forums

Chiefs’ forums were another convenient local structure that played a key role in harnessing positive masculinities toward the elimination of VAWG, SGBV, and HP in the Machinga district. The modus

operandi of these forums is that all chiefs under a Traditional Authority have meetings where they discuss issues affecting their communities, share ideas, and coordinate their efforts. One program implementer stated that the Chiefs' forum is being used to harness positive masculinity in the fight against VAWG, GBV, and HP such as child marriages. A program implementer explained how the chiefs' forums are being leveraged:

"It[chief's forum] is also one of the platforms that we use to promote positive masculinity. It is through this platform that marriages of underage girls are dissolved, and people are brought on board and they are taught what positive masculinities are all about, the effects of marrying an underage girl are also emphasized. This platform promotes positive masculinity through the involvement of traditional leaders, not everyone, whereas a barbershop toolbox involves everyone, a different scenario to a Chief's forum. I should make it clear that in the chief's forum, it is only the Chiefs who meet to discuss issues of their communities to end issues of gender-based violence and bring about transformation in the community..." (KII Program implementer, 24-year-old female, Machinga, urban).

e) Men in churches and mosques

Churches and mosques are agents of socialization and have been playing a significant role in promoting the adoption of positive masculine norms to eliminate VAWG, SGBV, and HP. While some respondents, particularly program implementers, pastors, and sheiks articulated the presence of training programs for pastors and sheiks on the promotion of positive masculinity so as to engage their male congregants, they are faced with challenges. The programs have not reached many religious leaders and participation by congregants has been low. The paucity of affirmation by other types of respondents such as community members in general is perhaps indicative of the limited reach this initiative has had. Nevertheless, it has contributed to the adoption of positive masculinities to the few it has reached.

There is a men's ministry, "utumiki wa abambo" in our church that has been established because of these programs. This ministry focuses on marriage issues that men should lead by example in families. The ministry encourages men to take full responsibility for their families. Men should have good manners. Research showed that men are being convicted, unlike women. Men meet once in two weeks to discuss issues that shape them to be responsible men. Most of them have good marriages because of this ministry. Men also encourage each other to do charity work. Sometimes they visit those in need and give them a little something. This keeps men busy instead of going for beer drinking (IDI Pastor, 57-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

Barriers to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HPs

VAWG, SGBV, and HPs persist as significant challenges with great consequences for individuals and societies. While efforts have been made to address these challenges, there exist barriers to harnessing positive masculinity to effectively prevent and eliminate such harmful practices.

i) Cultural and religious beliefs

Cultural and religious beliefs play an essential role in shaping perceptions of masculinity. Respondents expressed that in some communities, culturally “hegemonic masculinity” is linked to control and dominance, and this challenges the efforts to redefine masculinity. Therefore, at times initiatives that challenge cultural and religious norms about masculinity are not easily accepted by people, making it hard to shift people’s attitudes towards positive masculinity. Also, resistance to change and the fear of deviating from cultural norms can hinder efforts to promote positive masculinity.

“One of the barriers I could say is rigid cultural norms. It is not easy just to change the norm, something that has been there for years.” (KII Program implementer, 24-year-old female, Machinga, urban)

ii) Low literacy levels and ignorance

Respondents further expressed that insufficient knowledge and lack of access to information on VAWG contribute to the persistence of negative masculinities. Without proper education, people struggle to understand the importance of gender equality and embracing positive masculinity.

“Yes, illiteracy level is playing a major role in this than those who are educated. Educated people do things deliberately because they know the laws. While an illiterate person does things out of ignorance.” (KII Policy maker, 66-year-old male, Machinga rural)

During one of the focus group discussions, some respondents expressed that lack of and limited awareness of VAWG issues act as a barrier to promoting positive masculinity. They explained that some leaders once they get some information, they do not share the information with others. While there are some programs in the community, they are far too little and have not reached a critical mass of men and boys, hence the ignorance and lack of awareness. This was alluded to by a key informant:

“...The interventions to engage men are not enough so it is difficult for men to change for the better. Those are some of the points I see.” (KII Program implementer, 36-year-old female, Machinga urban)

iii) Lack of interest in participating in community meetings

Participants stated that most men and boys do not attend community meetings where VAWG and positive masculinity messages are shared. Men’s lack of interest in attending community meetings impedes the success of programs to reduce VAWG and effectively promote male engagement. One FGD participant alludes to men’s lack of interest in participating in community meetings: “

“Mostly men and boys do not like attending meetings where such issues are talked about. They have their places like bawo [a very common and popular local board game (similar to Mancala played in East Africa) usually played in public places with men congregating and taking turns to play thereby providing opportunities of dialogue on various topics including positive masculinities as initiated by male champions under the barbershop toolbox in such spaces] where such information can reach them like in football pitches.” (FGD Participant, 25-34-year-old male, Machinga, rural)

iv) Poverty

The expectation that a man should always provide for his family often leads to power imbalances within families. One respondent reported that in some cases men facing economic insecurities may resort to violence as a means of coping with frustration.

“Poverty is also contributing to violence against women and girls. As the way I am, I will be told there is no relish [food] in the house and I respond “ha”, I also don’t have money, you will sort it by yourself. That will affect children because it may happen that as a man you have money, but you only consider for yourself that it’s better to use it fixing my car other than buying food for the house” (KII Policy maker, 66-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

v) Lack of resources and funding

Inadequate resources and funding hinder efforts to promote positive masculinity and end VAWG. Respondents reported that even when positive masculinities are promoted, a lack of resources restricts the geographic scope of outreach services. Without funding, it was difficult to organize transportation and conduct capacity building. The lack of funds to ensure capacity building for male champions and mentors was reported as a barrier to promoting positive masculinity. One program implementer stated that because of limited funding, refresher training to reinforce and update the knowledge and skills of mentors and champions could not be conducted. One district level policy maker stated that finance remains a major barrier to efforts to harness positive masculinity programs:

“There are many barriers in terms of finance. Interventions for positive masculinities in Machinga were started by the Spotlight. Spotlight was working with 24 T/As and out of these 24 T/As, positive masculinities were shown in less than 10 T/As. This means that more people have not yet initiated this positive masculinity because of the funds we have as a gender office. The funds that we get per month cannot cater for all the T/As.” (KII Policy maker, 29-year-old female, Machinga, urban)

Interventions on male engagement in ending VAWG

This section presents policy and program interventions that promote male engagement to end VAWG in Malawi and Machinga.

Policy interventions

Policy interventions play an essential role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of people in societies. To ensure there is effective engagement of men in addressing violence against women and girls as well as harmful practices, laws, policies, and strategies were developed and are being implemented. At the community level, there are by-laws instituted to address VAWG. Respondents shared some of the by-laws that explicitly condemn all forms of gender-based violence and instituted consequences for the perpetrators. These by-laws are also used to promote the enrolment of children in schools. One interviewee explained that traditional authorities (Chiefs) enforced the by-laws by imposing sanctions in the form of goats on anyone found guilty.

A key informant also alluded to the existence of by-laws as a community-based approach to tackling VAWG:

“[...we have community by-laws that were set by community leaders and their subjects that if a man is abusing his woman, he must be penalized...]” (KII Program implementer, 53-year-old male, Machinga urban)

However, the national government has laws and policies to promote male engagement and end VAWG, including Gender Policy, 2016, the National Action Plan to Combat Gender-Based Violence in Malawi, 2014 to 2020, and the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, 2014. According to a key informant, at a national level, there is a gender equality act, 2013 which promotes gender equality and inclusion of women in leadership in public institutions. There is also the newly launched male engagement strategy which aims to promote positive masculinity. One program implementer noted:

“As a ministry, we have just launched the male engagement strategy. This male engagement strategy is very keen as we are dealing with issues to do with male involvement and taking masculinity from negative to positive.” (KII Program implementer, 36-year-old female, Machinga urban).

Positive masculinity intervention: the barbershop toolbox

The Spotlight Initiative was implemented in a total of 21 traditional authorities in the Machinga district. While the scope of the Spotlight Initiative was broader, outcome area three which focuses on prevention and social norm change through male engagement to end violence against women and girls is relevant to this study. Under this activity, the Barbershop toolbox was developed and used to train 3,948 male champions to promote positive masculinities toward ending VAWG and improving women’s SRHR. In addition, 15 religious leaders were reached with barbershop toolkits and they responded to ending VAWG through religious structures. The barbershop toolbox is grounded in the He-for-She Strategy, a global solidarity movement for the advancement of gender equality, initiated by the United Nations in 2014.

The barbershop toolbox encourages men and boys to become agents of change in the promotion of gender equality grounded in a better understanding of how gender inequality limits the ability of individuals, businesses, and communities to reach their full human, economic, and social potential. As reported by many participants, this intervention targeted men and boys in the prevention of violence to transform their negative behavior and attitudes. Through this program, messages on positive masculinity and ending VAWG, SGBV, and HP were spread to men and boys through their peers, known as male champions in barbershops and clubs.

“For the Spotlight project, one of the strategies that has been used to scale up the fight against gender-based violence, gender masculinities, and harmful practices is the “He-for-She” strategy where we are using the barbershop toolbox. This is more like a platform where men and boys meet to discuss various issues including violence against women and girls, issues of gender, sex, and sexual and reproductive health as well as how men can conduct more community mobilizations so as to share messages about gender with other men who are not yet aware of the issues.” (KII Program implementer, 24-year-old female, urban).

According to some key informants, engaging men as champions has a significant influence within communities as they act as advocates and role models in challenging harmful practices and encouraging gender equality.

“As a ministry, we have engaged male champions who have been identified and trained to be change agents so that they should be able to influence the decisions of others so that others should also express positive masculinity in the communities.” (KII Project/ program planner, 29 year old female, Lilongwe urban)

Impact of the barber shop toolbox intervention on masculinity beliefs and attitudes

This section presents notable changes attributable to the positive masculinity program based on beneficiaries’ and program implementers’ narratives.

i) Increased awareness about forms of violence and gender equality

In all the interviews with beneficiaries and program implementers, one recurring response on the notable change they observed that is attributable to the intervention was better knowledge and understanding of all forms of violence, where to report it, and where to seek help.

“I think the program has performed well,” People are now aware of what violence is and where to report it when they face domestic violence. Women and girls are now free as they know where to report violence FGD Participant, 35-45-year-old female, Machinga, rural).

Beneficiaries opined that ignorance about different forms of violence is among the reasons people perpetuate violence. For example, marital rape is not well known but the program has helped men to understand that forcing their wives to have sex constitutes violence:

“They now know that if they force their women to have sex it’s a form of abuse. They can understand because it’s their fellow man saying it. If they hear it from a woman, they cannot understand.” (IDI Beneficiary, 23-year-old female, Machinga, rural).

As noted in the transcript above, having a male champion educate other men about what constitutes violence made the message resonate with men.

ii) Perceptions and attitudinal changes about gender roles and hegemonic masculinity

Participants in the barber shop toolbox intervention stated that the program has helped them confront and change their perceptions and attitudes about hegemonic masculinity and embrace more gender-equitable views. Beneficiaries noted that they used to hold the view that men are superior to women but with their interaction with the program, they have changed this once-held view. While noting that men are respected more than women culturally resulting in discrimination against women, one key informant opined that in projects such as the Spotlight Initiative, people’s mindsets have changed so much that they now recognize the importance of educating the girl child just as they would the boy child. Women beneficiaries recounted that their views on the role of men as the sole provider in the family have changed as they now see why it is important for women to contribute. They noted that leaving the provider roles to only men is among the causes of poverty, especially in cases of demise

of the men. “My mindset changed, now I know a man should work as equally as a woman should,” said one female beneficiary of the program. Another female beneficiary explained that she used to believe that the provider role was solely for men because her mother never worked and only her father provided for the family. She went further to state that she used to believe that only men should be employed and boys were supposed to be more educated than girls:

“In the past, I used to think that a man was the only one who was supposed to provide for the family. I didn’t know that a woman could also do the same. For instance, in my family, my father is employed whilst my mother is not. In the past, I thought women were not supposed to get a job and only men should be employed. Also, I thought boys were supposed to be more educated than girls. Based on our norms here, I thought when a girl reaches standard 8, or form 2, it’s time for her to get married. These programs have met my expectations because they have changed people’s mindsets, including men’s” (IDI Beneficiary, 16-year-old female, Machinga, rural).

iii) Behavioral changes

Program beneficiaries and implementers reported some behavioral changes attributable to the program. One notable behavior change reported was the increased male participation in eliminating harmful practices that violate women’s and girls’ rights. A beneficiary noted that at the beginning of the program, there were a few men involved unlike now when a lot of men and youths are participating, not only in the program but also doing something to help victims of domestic violence in the community. One program beneficiary alluded to this point by stating:

“What I can say now is that many male youths are taking part in ending domestic violence. These youths can’t see a woman being abused by a man and stand there watching, it cannot happen, they will do something to help that lady out of trouble.” (IDI Beneficiary, 29-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

Also, one beneficiary noted that the program has transformed his attitude toward domestic violence. While acknowledging that change is a slow process, he maintained that since he joined the program, he could not ignore cases of men abusing women or girls. Another change reported was the increased participation of men in domestic chores, childcare, and involvement in seeking maternal healthcare services. One beneficiary recounted how the program has transformed his behavior:

“Since the joining of these programs, my perception of being a man has changed a lot. Before I joined the programs, it was hard for me to escort my wife to go for maternal services to the hospital when she was pregnant. But after joining the programs, we go together. Furthermore, whenever my wife is away, I can cook food for myself. But before joining the programs, I had to wait for my wife to cook for me. In addition to that, I take part in taking care of my children like taking a bath. Before joining the program, my wife had to carry hoes and a baby on her back when going to the garden. But after joining the program, I carry hoes and even a baby on my back. I also carry firewood when I am going back home from the garden which I used not to do before I joined the programs. At first, it was hard for me to be in groups with my fellow community members. But now I enjoy it. I just want to say that, after joining the programs, some residents come and ask me how I manage all I have stated to you. So I explain to them clearly how it started” (IDI Beneficiary, 42-year-old male, Machinga, rural).

Beneficiaries observed that their participation in domestic chores has improved their relationship with their partners. Some beneficiaries have reduced their expense on alcohol, are more open about their income, and spend more on providing for their family. Analysis of beneficiaries' and program implementers' narratives also reveals that the program has contributed to a reduction in violence in their communities as well as beneficiary's violence perpetration. They maintained that the reduction in reporting cases of domestic violence to authorities is evidence of the positive impact of the intervention. Male beneficiaries stated that men are expressing positive masculinity because they advise each other on how best to live in the community to avoid conflicts. One beneficiary alluded to the change in his domestic violence perpetration:

"I was one of the perpetrators of domestic violence, but now I am a changed person. But now, I gave her capital to start business and I can see that there are some changes indeed." (IDI Program beneficiary, 40-year-old male, Machinga, rural)

Religious leaders and village heads also attested to the positive impact of the program, stating that they no longer sign or officiate child marriages. One religious leader maintained that the training under the program changed his perception of child marriage, and he now understands how child marriage can harm girls. One Pastor who benefited from the program recounted that religious leaders are ignorant of the harm associated with child marriage and it took his participation in the training for his views to change:

"I have already explained that before the spotlight came, we as pastors, were ignorant of so many things but when they came, we learned so many things. Though I went to theological college, I was still ignorant of some things, in the past we could officiate weddings of under 18 children but what we noticed was that that kind of marriage couldn't go far. When the spotlight came, they taught us not to officiate these little ones and now we don't allow them to marry at such an age but we send them to school" (IDI Pastor, 56-year-old male, Machinga, rural).



IMPLICATIONS

This study drew data from community members, program implementers, policymakers, and positive masculinity program beneficiaries to 1), examine how masculinity is constructed and reconstructed, 2) highlight barriers and facilitators of engaging men and boys to end VAWG, and 3), identify and assess interventions considered to be effective in engaging men and boys to end VAWG. The study findings demonstrate that hegemonic masculinity, characterized by beliefs that men are superior to women, and manifested through family provision, violence perpetration, philandering, gambling, and alcohol abuse are considered to be the root cause of men's perpetuation of VAWG. However, these traits were no longer viewed as ideal although not providing for the family was still termed as unmanly.

Despite some traditional hegemonic masculinity traits being valued in the study settings, a transition to what the participants termed ideal masculinity is emerging. Men who demonstrate ideal masculinity adopt more gender-equitable norms, show care, respect, and love, and are non-violent. Additionally, female beneficiaries of positive masculinity interventions in the study site are reconstructing masculinity in ways that emphasize the role of women in supporting the men to provide for the family. This demonstrates shared household roles and responsibilities. These findings illustrate that promoting positive masculinity through male engagement interventions is essential in promoting gender equality. The findings are consistent with the masculinity literature in Africa (14, 15).

Consistent with the literature, the study found that ignorance and illiteracy, poverty, lack of interest, inadequate funding, and cultural and religious beliefs are barriers to harnessing positive masculinity to end VAWG(16). A previous study demonstrated that men's adherence to negative gender norms hinders efforts to promote positive masculinity (16). Cultural and religious beliefs were among the prominent barriers that play a significant role in shaping societal norms and behaviors. Challenging these ingrained beliefs requires culturally sensitive approaches that promote positive masculinities without undermining cultural identity. Men's lack of interest in positive masculinity programs is due to stigma and social discomfort (16) which could be attributable to safeguarding cultural identity.

Positive masculinity programs often face funding gaps, thus limiting their scope and reach. Because of limited funding, program implementation is not sustained. A majority of interventions on positive masculinity are implemented for two years or less, which limits men's extensive exposure to the interventions (17). Also, illiteracy and ignorance about the positive masculinity programs and VAWG contribute to their limited awareness and involvement in the programs (18). In communities with limited access to education, individuals may lack awareness of the negative consequences of VAWG or the importance of positive masculinities. Educational initiatives can be instrumental in challenging stereotypes, raising awareness, and promoting gender equality. Poverty can exacerbate power imbalances and contribute to the perpetuation of VAWG (19). In economically disadvantaged communities, individuals may face increased stress, frustration, and competition for limited resources. Addressing poverty is integral to creating an environment where positive masculinities can flourish. Economic empowerment programs, job training, and initiatives that promote equal access to resources can help alleviate some of the pressures contributing to violence.

Community institutions and structures, such as the Chief's forum, Churches, Mosques, and Youth corners can provide platforms for harnessing positive masculinities and are instrumental in the transformation of norms and deconstruction of harmful masculinities that perpetuate VAWG. The results from this study particularly alluded to the use of chief's forums where chiefs discuss issues of concern with fellow chiefs as well as youth clubs and children's corners as sources of positive masculinity initiatives and peer learning. According to Casey et al (20), "social networks are best leveraged by recruiting members of specific communities or constituencies and training and supporting them to be "ambassadors" of GBV prevention in their contexts" as is the case with the youth clubs reported in our study. In concurrence, Carlson et al (12) articulated the notion that community members are best placed to be credible GBV prevention messengers and can tailor their approaches in culturally specific ways. Our study alluded to the significance of male champions as agents of change in the elimination of VAWG.

Our study highlights programmatic interventions such as the barbershop toolbox, which uses male champions to reach men with gender transformative messages as a promising approach to engage men and boys to end VAWG. Based on beneficiaries' narratives, this program fostered a better understanding and awareness of VAWG and harmful gender norms, helping beneficiaries confront their beliefs and practices that are violent and embracing more equitable gender norms. While it is not clear if changes will be sustained beyond the duration of the project, there is evidence that the intervention changed the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of beneficiaries. Central to the process of change is the use of male champions and safe spaces to challenge harmful gender norms. Beneficiaries narrated how supporting their wives in doing household chores has improved their relationship, with their wives happier than before. Consistent with Gibbs et al. (21), it is not clear if it is the safe spaces or the content of the intervention that facilitated the changes. While key informants linked the program to a reduction in the reporting of violence in the community, it is important to further interrogate this assertion with data to confirm if there are reductions in reporting of domestic violence and why and also if cases are instead reported to police as opposed to traditional authorities. It is also important to note that a reduction in reporting is not synonymous with a reduction in incidences of violence. However, the assertion that youths now rise to do something when women are abused is consistent with Izuagbara et al. (22) finding that positive masculinity program participation is associated with intervening during situations of violence against women.

Strengths and Limitations

This study provides insights into how masculinity is constructed and reconstructed in Machinga, Malawi, drawing on data from diverse groups of participants. The triangulation of FGDs, key informant interviews, and IDI data from rural and urban settings and among young people and adults is an important strength of this study. Drawing from rich and diverse data sources, the study interrogates the ideal expression of masculinity that transcends traditional portrayal of manliness and illuminates positive masculinity from an African perspective. The study also assesses facilitators and barriers to harnessing positive masculinity to end VAWG and promising interventions to engage men and boys in ending VAWG. While the findings are illuminating, the study is not without limitations that readers must consider in interpreting the results. Only qualitative data were used in this study, limiting the generalizability of the findings. The evaluation of the barber shop toolbox as an enabler of positive gender transformative change is based on the subjective reality of study participants. A robust quantitative design, with well-defined indicators, is needed to objectively assess the effects of the intervention.



CONCLUSION

This study recognizes the significance of involving men and boys in initiatives to combat VAWG. The study findings suggest that promoting positive masculinity and male engagement can be a highly effective strategy in the overall effort to eliminate VAWG. The results of the study can inform policymaking and program development focused on gender norm transformation, positive masculinities, and male engagement.

Recommendations for male engagement in ending VAWG

This section describes what could be done to encourage greater involvement of men and boys in programs to end/prevent VAWG / SGBV and improve SRHR according to the study participants.

i) Co-develop positive masculinity interventions with men and boys

Men and boys are key to ending VAWG. As such, efforts should be geared towards reaching a critical mass of men and boys with promising interventions that are co-developed with them. Interviewees asserted that co-developed interventions are likely to be more effective because they would meet men's and boys' needs. Interventions that are not co-developed with men and boys could face resistance and limited participation among men and boys

ii) Create more safe spaces and clubs for men and boys to meet

While there are safe spaces and clubs in the communities, interviewees observed that they are not enough. To ensure that positive masculinity messages saturate the community, there is a need for more safe spaces, and clubs for men, women, girls, and boys. Also, those who participate in positive masculinity programs should be encouraged to share the information with others. Positive masculinity messages should be shared on radio and men should be encouraged to join these clubs and safe spaces to benefit fully from the programs.

iii) Integrate empowerment and sporting programs into positive masculinity interventions

Participants suggested the need to integrate empowerment and sporting activities into positive masculinity programs to encourage male participation and make the program more effective. They maintained that young people engage in violence as an alternative way of re-asserting control and displaying masculinity given that they are idle and have been excluded from economic activities. Empowerment should take the form of loans for small-scale businesses, and it should target both men and women. One interviewee stated, “When men and women work, they are both happy and have no time to perpetuate violence”.

iv) Reporting VAWG cases and enforcing the law

Participants stated that men and boys should report cases of VAWG they witness to authorities and the law should hold perpetrators accountable. Interviewees asserted that lack of reporting and law enforcement leads to the normalization of violence in the community. Participants recommended that violent perpetrators should be severely punished to send a strong message to others to desist from perpetuating violence.

v) Work with traditional and religious leaders

Participants opined that religious and traditional leaders should become role models for ending VAWG and this can only be realized by training them to better understand what constitutes violence and how to address it properly.

vi) Increase funding for positive masculinity interventions

Positive masculinity programs often face a shortage of funding that limits their reach and makes it unsustainable. As such, interviewees called for a sustainable funding stream for a positive masculinity program to broaden its reach and sustain its delivery in the community. Also, projects should be designed taking into account how to sustain them and they should have a community focus rather than an individual focus.

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