Learning Network

Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

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Rethinking Masculinities: Understanding diverse and intersecting masculinities to end Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Recognizing intersecting and diverse ways to understand masculinity does not diminish the reality of gender-based violence (GBV) as a persistent systemic issue. Instead, it provides deeper insights into how patriarchy and/or gender discrimination are socially constructed rather than inherent to human nature. This understanding also broadens our perspectives on GBV by questioning the inherent association between masculinity, power, and violence.

Recognizing the diverse power dynamics within various forms of masculinity helps reveal how GBV is perpetuated and sustained, as well as its impact on individuals across a spectrum of diverse gendered identities and experiences. For example, GBV is often discussed in terms of men exerting power over women, either by controlling and/or withholding power. However, in recent decades, concepts like intersectionality—understanding how various identities shape our experiences of power and oppression—and decolonization—the practice of dismantling colonial practices that perpetuate systemic oppression—have led to enriched and nuanced discussions demonstrating how GBV is a tool used in broader systems of oppression. Understanding this can lead to unlearning harmful ideas and working towards liberation for all genders.

Society is increasingly recognizing how intersecting identities such as race, disability, and sexuality intersect with a spectrum of diverse gendered experiences. This challenges and encourages rethinking and broadening understandings of gender and masculinity. For example, not all "masculine" people experience or define "masculinity" in the same way. There is no singular view of masculinity; instead, it encompasses a vast array of perspectives that can be understood through various identities and their intersections.

About this Brief:

This Brief outlines diverse examples of intersectional masculinities, aiming to deepen our understanding and efforts to address GBV. It begins by examining how colonialism has shaped dominant understandings of gender and masculinity. The Brief then explores diverse cultural perspectives on masculinity. The impacts and unique expressions of GBV are then highlighted to demonstrate how power dynamics and GBV operate alongside an intersecting spectrum of masculinities across gender diversity, race, disability, class, and age. Finally, it concludes by sharing and drawing from underrepresented models of masculinity to challenge colonial constructions of masculinity for a more inclusive approach to addressing GBV.

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Unpacking Masculinity

Before unpacking the concept of masculinity, it is important to understand how colonialism creates narrow categories of identities, including masculinity. Colonialism normalizes the violence and injustices of colonization in mainstream culture, framing these actions as beneficial to society. This includes normalizing beliefs that impose false binaries on human experiences, creating artificial distinctions between what is deemed "right" and "wrong" ways of being. This colonial framework justifies and imposes "correcting" those deemed "wrong", leading to the erasure and oppression of groups that demonstrate other possible ways of being. In this context, diverse identities are often labelled and stigmatized as "undesirable," "dangerous," or "deviant," or some other inhuman category, reinforcing the notion that colonial beliefs of sex and gender are universally superior and irrefutable.

Colonial ideas of masculinity typically assume that individuals are cisgender (a term for when someone's gender identity aligns with the sex they're medically assigned at birth) and heterosexual by default. These ideas are grounded in the concept of a gender binary, which categorizes people as either male/masculine/men or female/feminine/women, each associated with specific biological traits. This binary framework often perpetuates beliefs, such as the notion that men are naturally dominant and women are naturally submissive, or that men are meant to be hunters while women are meant to be nurturers. These rigid gender roles place harmful societal expectations on men and boys (and women and girls) which leads to inequality, inequity, and violence.

These colonial beliefs contribute to bioessentialism[2], the harmful idea that an individual's body defines their identity and personality. In the context of masculinity, bioessentialism reinforces what is often referred to as "toxic" masculinity, where traits such as dominance and aggression are normalized as biological inevitabilities. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that rewards these traits in those deemed "right" and punishes those who contradict and deviate these beliefs and expectations.

Learn More: Check out this video by researcher Alexander Avila, offering a detailed exploration of the history of Western colonialism and its impacts on gender ideology.[1]

Understanding the impacts of colonialism and how it has shaped our perceptions of masculinity can help uplift and revitalize diverse cultural perspectives, promote inclusive models of care, and disrupt toxic forms of masculinity to prevent GBV.

Recognizing Diverse Masculinities: From Past to Present

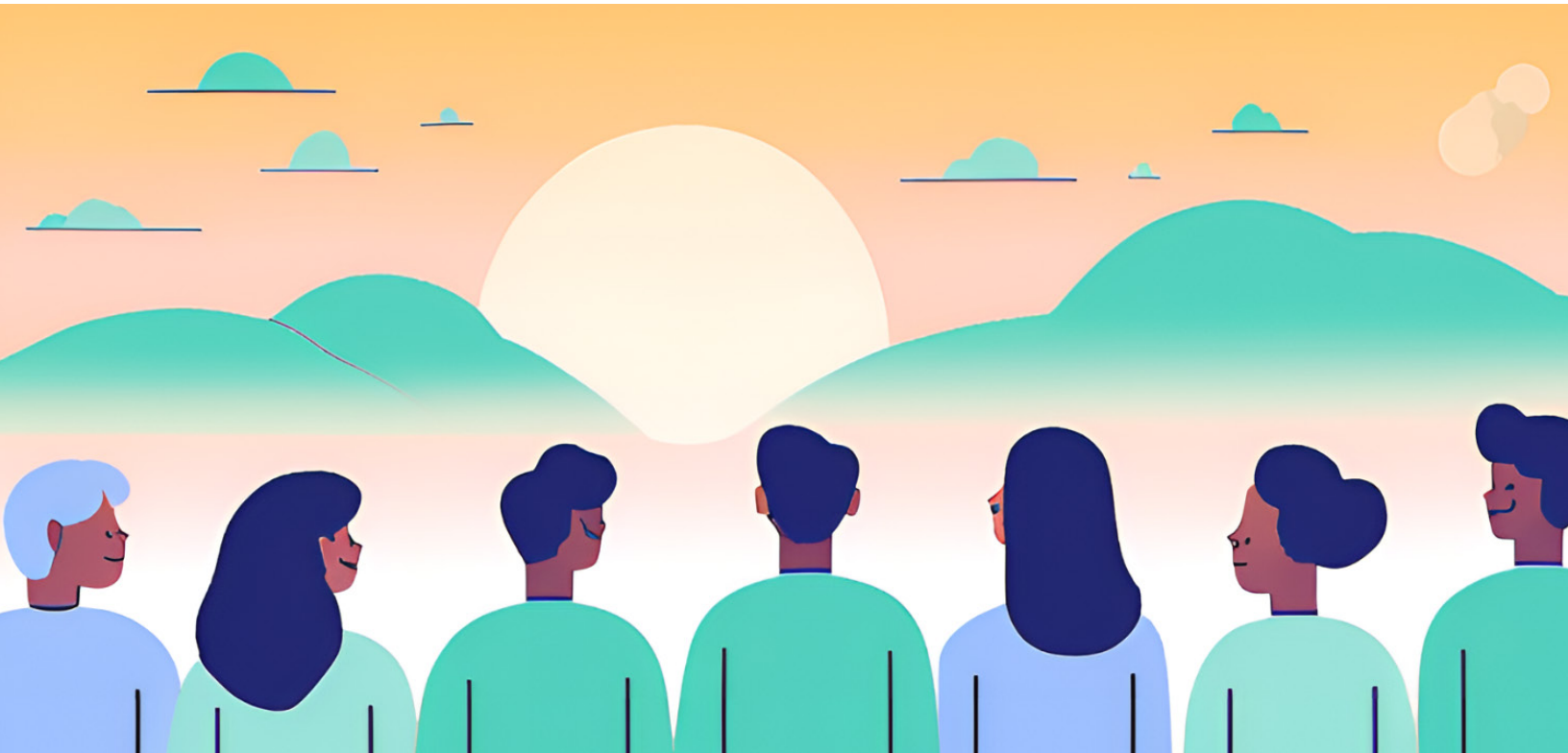
This section recognizes diverse perspectives on Queer and Trans, racialized and Indigenous, and disabled masculinities—perspectives that are often excluded from dominant narratives about masculinity. This exclusion results in the erasure of a diverse spectrum of masculinities reducing them to a singular, dominant perspective. This not only reinforces marginalization but also conflates the diversity of masculinity into one, excluding many marginalized genders from critical conversations about responding to and addressing GBV. The lack of recognition and inclusion can increase vulnerability, as many of these groups continue to experience GBV at disproportionate rates.

Recognizing and understanding diverse masculinities is crucial for developing more inclusive and effective responses to GBV, ensuring that the voices and experiences of all marginalized groups are represented and addressed.

Queer and Trans Masculinities

Applying colonial assumptions about gender to other people in our everyday lives reinforces heteronormativity and cisnormativity across societal institutions, our views of one another, and media representations. This also influences how we perceive and interpret the intentions and actions of the people around us. This can look like sexualizing or demonizing gender variance or same gender attraction, which can result in misunderstandings of queer, trans, non-binary, intersex or gender non-conforming people who do not conform to the expectations of the gender binary.[3] This contributes to the oppression of all marginalized genders as a broad category, not just cisgender or gender conforming women, when it comes to GBV.

Marginalized genders provide perspectives that can demonstrate other possibilities for how we might relate to each other. For example, asexual men and masculine people can show how a person can identify with masculinity without being “controlled” or driven by sexual desire. Conversely, trans women and transfeminine people often demonstrate that our bodies do not have to dictate how we define ourselves or live our lives. Embracing gender and sexual queerness not only challenges the idea that toxic masculinity is natural and inevitable but also calls into question whether such traits are even desirable.



Racialized and Indigenous Masculinities

There are many historical examples from diverse racialized and Indigenous cultures that offer different perspectives on masculinity, gender, and sexuality—perspectives that continue to impact individuals living in Canada today. These include various Indigenous cultures from Turtle Island (colonially known as North America), as well as African, Asian, Caribbean, and other cultural traditions. Looking to these cultures, which existed before colonization or in resistance to it, reveals alternative ways of understanding gender and sexuality.

Before European colonization, these cultures held different views on gender and sexuality, including which physical traits were associated with gender, such as facial hair, body shapes, or height differences. What might have been considered typical for European cultures was not necessarily the norm elsewhere. For example, many Indigenous cultures on Turtle Island recognized non-binary genders and sexualities. Individuals who claimed these identities often held spiritual significance within their communities. Today, some Indigenous queer people use the term Two-Spirit to describe having both masculine and feminine spirits, encompassing their "sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity".[4] Two-Spirit people come from Indigenous cultures that originally did not follow the mainstream gender binary that today is the dominant theory and model. As a result, their understandings and realities of gender do not necessarily translate to Western definitions of transgender or queer identities.

More examples can be found across various cultural histories, such as the term "hijra" which is used in some South Asian cultures.[5] It is a term to describe a spectrum of gender and sexual variance that has existed throughout their cultural histories. Many hijras also held spiritually significant roles in their communities, a status that was often respected prior to the impacts of British and Portuguese colonization which marginalized these identities.

Learn more about Indigenous Masculinities in this Facebook Live presented by Sage Lacerte from the Moosehide Campaign:

Disabled Masculinities

Many disabled men and masculine individuals often feel excluded from colonial definitions and conceptions of masculinity due to ableism—the systemic oppression of and negative attitudes towards disabled people. In these definitions, masculinity is often linked to possession of strength, power, dominance and "being a provider". Consequently, disabled individuals may not be seen as masculine, even if they identify that way. This exclusion is not limited to physical disabilities. Neurodivergent individuals—a term describing a broad spectrum of mental, cognitive, intellectual, and developmental functions that differ from what is considered typical, some of which may be considered a disability—can also be excluded and distanced from masculinity if they do not conform to dominant masculine norms. For example, society may favour men who express hyperactivity through athleticism while labeling others as "sensitive."

Learn More: In the article, "On Being Black and 'Disabled But Not Really", Imani Barbarin explores some of the complexities of the disabled experience and masculinity and how they are compounded by race.[6]

Despite this exclusion, disabled and neurodivergent men and masculine individuals can demonstrate many ways to imagine masculinity that go beyond productivity or performing typical feats of strength or dominance.

Reflection: What traits might emerge if we asked individuals how they embody their masculinity beyond athleticism and "self-sufficiency"? For instance, the author of this Brief reflects that their masculinity is reflected in their personal commitment to supporting and advocating for social justice.

Intersectionality: Locating Masculinities on a Ladder of Power and Privilege

Diverse masculinities are not mutually exclusive; individuals may identify with multiple, intersecting identities simultaneously. Within these identities, there are further distinctions in privileges, power, and barriers that individuals experience.

Recognizing diverse and nuanced masculine identities is crucial for better understanding GBV because it challenges simplistic assumptions that link biology, masculinity, or sexuality directly to experiences of violence.

Recognizing diverse and nuanced masculine identities exposes the complex ways in which individuals may hold multiple and sometimes competing forms of privilege and power, which are not accessed or experienced in equal or equitable ways. This complexity underscores that GBV is fundamentally about power and control dynamics, not biology, masculinity or sexuality. Anyone who holds power and control over others can potentially cause harm. To effectively address and respond to GBV, it is essential to understand how these intersecting and diverse identities influence power and violence.

In this section, the metaphor of a ladder is used to represent privilege and power. Instead of viewing privilege and power as fixed traits that one is born with, they are seen as steps on a tall ladder, where an individual's position is shaped by their intersecting identities. Forms of masculinity that align with dominant social norms—such as cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied masculinities—tend to be positioned higher on the ladder, granting greater access to power and privilege. In contrast, masculinities that deviate from these norms—such as queer, trans, disabled, or racialized masculinities—often face systemic barriers, positioning them lower on the ladder. Each privilege or barrier functions as a step, with "steps up" representing access to advantages and "steps down" representing barriers that limit access to power, resources, and safety.

The following breakdown of this ladder metaphor examines underrepresented perspectives on gender across different groups, exploring how power and privilege operate from an intersectional perspective and shape experiences of GBV. This metaphor highlights the need to dismantle singular views of masculinity, privilege, and power and adopt an intersectional approach to understanding and addressing GBV.

Queer and Trans

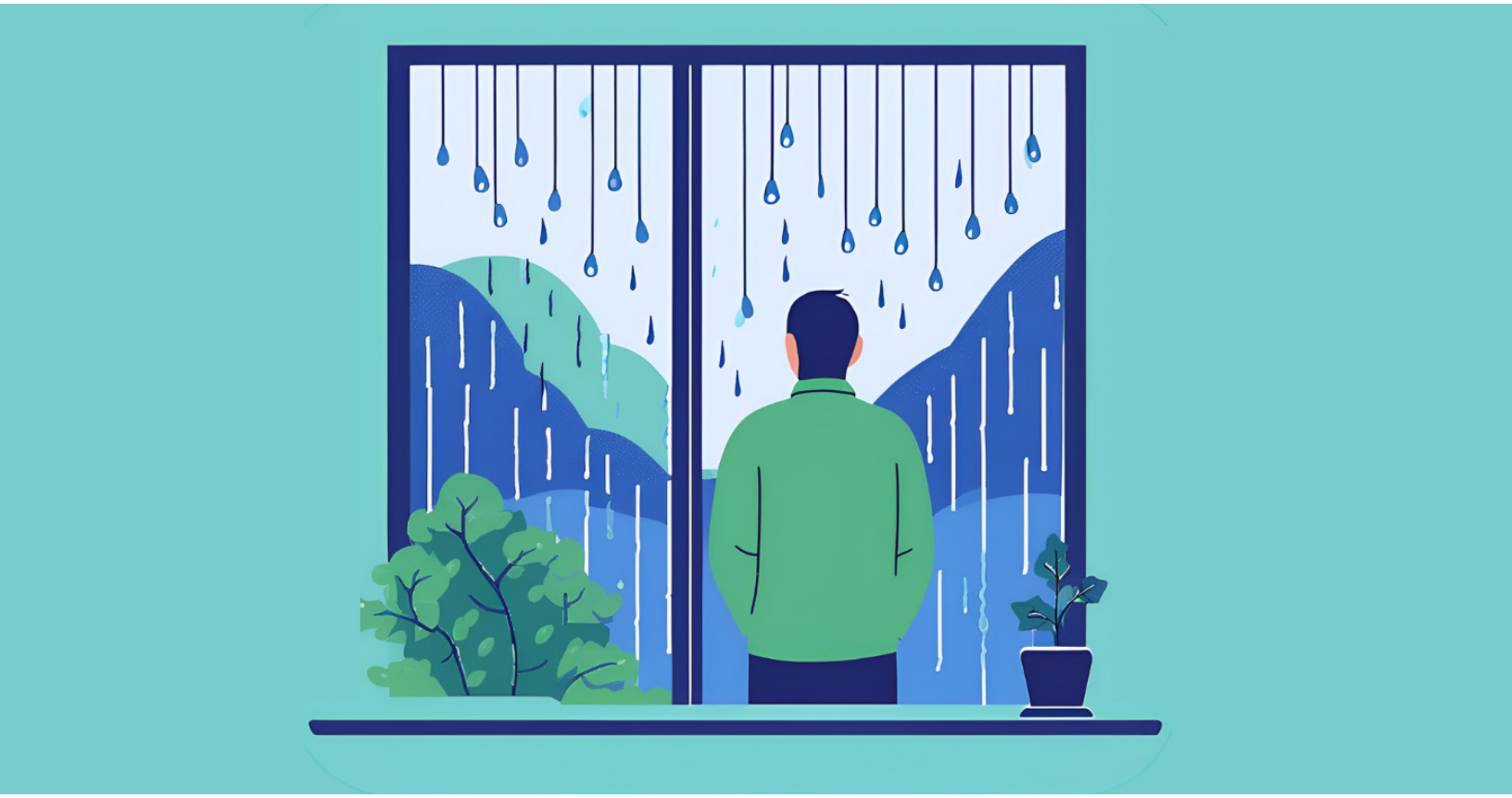
Trans, queer, and gender-nonconforming identities challenge dominant understandings of GBV by questioning assumptions about gender and who can perpetrate violence and harm. For example, trans people—particularly trans women—may face transphobia in spaces intended to support survivors of GBV. They may be excluded, subjected to sexual harassment, or experience abuse targeting their trans identity. Additionally, some cisgender women, both heterosexual and queer, may identify themselves as TERFs, trans-exclusionary radical feminists, and may perpetrate sexual harassment or abuse against trans people, particularly trans women. This widespread abuse can be perpetuated by cisgender people of all genders, becoming normalized and unquestioned. This reality demonstrates how GBV impacts marginalized genders, revealing that while cisgender heterosexual men are still most often perpetrators of GBV[7], anyone can use the systemic violence towards queer and trans people to perpetrate GBV against them.

Oppression and Misogyny

Trans, queer, and gender-nonconforming individuals face oppression simply because their existence deviates from the dominant gender norms, which are rooted in colonial Eurocentric standards. These norms define “civilized” gender roles based on relationships, identity, or expression of gender. This oppression is rooted in misogyny, or prejudice against “women” or femininity, since these identities challenge ideas that relationships are about sexual dominance and gender roles are biologically predetermined and unchangeable.

Transmisogyny and “corrective abuse”

Trans women, transfeminine people, and gender-nonconforming queer people—such as femme gay, bisexual, asexual, or trans men, as well as butch lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or trans women—are often seen as especially deviant and in need of "correction”. This can include forms of “corrective” abuse for queer and trans people, like conversion therapy or sexual harassment and assault.[8] Trans women and transfeminine people, regardless of whether they present as more butch or more feminine, experience a compounded form of misogyny known as transmisogyny. They are often labeled as "gender traitors" or "impostors," further fueling discrimination and violence against them.



Race

Another section of the privilege and power ladder is race. While racialization impacts people across all genders, it also shapes experiences of gender itself. Colonial Eurocentric standards have constructed gender in relation to race, sexuality, and other intersecting identities.

Racialized Stereotypes of Gender

Colonial Eurocentric standards have created harmful racialized stereotypes that impact how masculinity and femininity are perceived across different racial groups. One example is the hypermasculinization of Black individuals, where all genders are perceived as more masculine or as socially and sexually aggressive. Black women, for example, are often depicted as aggressive or angry, while the stereotype of delicate femininity is rarely ever applied to how they are portrayed.[9] Another example is the hyperfeminization of Asian individuals where all genders are seen as more feminine or sexually and socially submissive. These harmful racialized stereotypes of gender can lead to sexual objectification based on race, including fetishization and hypersexualization[10].

Indigenous Marginalized Genders and Impunity

Racialized people who identify with marginalized genders experience an additional layer of prejudice and ignorance, making it harder to report or seek support for GBV, and sometimes do not have their cases taken seriously by the justice system.[11] For example, Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people had to, and continue to, fight and advocate for national recognition of the crisis of violence against Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people.

Colourism and lateral violence

The intersection of race, gender, and GBV is further shaped by colourism, a form of anti-Blackness that disproportionately impacts dark-skinned Black people compared to their lighter-skinned or non-Black counterparts.

This issue also includes Indigenous experiences, for example, among Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. Settler colonialism removes the agency and self-determination of Indigenous peoples and reinforces racial hierarchies. As a result, those who have historically been oppressed can also participate in colourism, as colonial systems encourage internal divisions and hierarchies within racialized communities.

Racialized stereotypes of violence and masculinity

Further, racialized men can sometimes be erased from conversations of oppression, often stereotyped and dehumanized as dangerous, terrorizing, and threatening, further contributing to their disposability and hypervisibility in society. This type of racialized stereotyping contributes to harmful biases and reinforces systemic racism.

Disability

Disability, when intersecting with gender, race, sexuality, and other forms of marginalization, can exacerbate experiences of GBV. Disabled individuals may also face additional barriers when seeking support, and their reports of abuse are often met with disbelief due to harmful stereotypes and dehumanizing narratives.

Cultural desexualization and sexual abuse

Disabled people of all genders experience cultural desexualization, where their sexual agency is disregarded or invalidated. They also experience higher rates of sexual abuse, typically perpetrated by caregivers such as a domestic partner, family member, medical professional, or support worker.[12] This is due to the reliance on caregivers to meet their basic needs like shelter or health and personal care. Reporting abuse can leave them at risk of losing vital support and care, and their reports are often met with disbelief due to their cultural desexualization.

Class

Class, or financial status, also impacts people of all genders by limiting access to resources and often making people dependent on others for shelter and basic needs. This dependency can increase vulnerability to various forms of GBV, including workplace sexual harassment, assault, exploitation, intimate partner violence, and abuse.

Economic dependency and financial abuse:

Class and financial status intersect with gender to shape experiences of GBV in multiple ways. Economic insecurity not only restricts access to essential resources but also increases vulnerability to abuse and exploitation. One of the most common forms of this is financial abuse, which restricts access to money and resources as a means of exerting power and control. Marginalized genders face additional economic barriers, including employment discrimination, wage gaps, and the extra costs associated with the “pink tax.” When these barriers intersect with race and disability, they further compound financial instability, leading to higher rates of poverty and increased vulnerability to GBV.

Age

Marginalized genders across different age groups, such as children, youth, and seniors, may experience a compounded risk of GBV due to societal norms and prejudices that devalue their voices and experiences. The intersection of age and gender creates unique challenges that can make recognizing and addressing GBV more difficult.

Vulnerability of children and youth:

Children and youth often lack the independence or agency that is afforded to their adult counterparts. Legally, they have little control over most aspects of their lives and are still in the process of learning what is or is not acceptable treatment from others. This vulnerability makes children and youth susceptible to exploitation and abuse. For marginalized gendered youth, these risks are further compounded. In addition to the general vulnerabilities associated with age, they also face discrimination and harmful mistreatment rooted in gender biases and stereotypes. These risks intensify when other marginalizations—such as race, disability, or economic insecurity—are present.

Learn more about engaging youth to promote healthy masculinities in this Backgrounder co-created with White Ribbon.

Challenges for older adults and seniors:

Conversely, older adults and seniors are often subjected to ageist stereotypes that equate aging with disability, regardless of their actual health status. This perception can influence how they are treated in various settings, particularly within long-term care facilities where staff have significant control over their daily lives and care. These biases can lead to experiences of GBV shaped by both age and gender discrimination.

New(ish) Models of Masculinity: Key Takeaways for Understanding and Addressing GBV

1. Learn from Diverse Models of Masculinity

Exploring various models of masculinity helps disrupt toxic norms and encourage healthier expressions of masculinity. Understanding how masculinity is embodied across cultures and identities can guide efforts to prevent and address GBV by offering alternatives to harmful stereotypes and behaviors associated with GBV.

2. Build from Bottom to Top

First, we must think about who is leading the movement and apply the principle of "leadership of the most impacted", as highlighted by Disability Justice principles. Sins Invalid[13], the collective of disabled artists that coined the term Disability Justice, included this principle because multiple marginalized people are best positioned to see how systems of oppression intersect and impact communities in complex ways. Engaging with, learning from, and working under the leadership of those most impacted helps ensure that strategies to address GBV account for the barriers faced by marginalized groups, particularly racialized and disabled trans people, whose masculinities are among the most marginalized.

3. Challenge Bioessentialism

Toxic and patriarchal definitions of gender are not universal or biologically determined, but culturally produced. This means that GBV is also culturally produced. The common association of masculinity with power or violence—without critical examination of the underlying power dynamics involved—reinforces the idea of biologically imposed roles: that men are born men, and their actions are natural instincts they cannot change.

By challenging this link between masculinity, power and violence, and uplifting diverse examples of masculinity, we can redefine gender roles and disrupt the normalization of GBV. This perspective encourages understanding gender without hierarchal assumptions.

4. Reconceptualize Sexuality and Consent

Diverse models of masculinity challenge traditional views on masculinity, sexuality, and consent. For example, these models provide us with examples of masculine support and expressions of affection in close relationships, including platonic ones. For example, in South Asian cultures, heterosexual men are often more physically affectionate with their male friends while maintaining their straight identities.

Further, examining how queerness and other cultures have historically structured their communities can deepen understandings of intimacy and what types of relationships exist. Learning from marginalized genders and distinct expressions of masculinity helps us develop a more nuanced approach to intimacy, consent, and accountability that applies across all genders and sexualities, challenging toxic and oppressive power dynamics that contribute to GBV.

Further Resources on Masculinity

These models of masculinity are not new - they already exist! This means there are already people modelling these versions of masculinity and gender, you just need to seek them out. That can feel challenging, since people from these diverse groups—especially those with multiple marginalized identities—are often the most excluded from mainstream spaces. To help, here are a few inspiring and accessible people:

Alexander Avila
"Is there a crisis of masculinity or is it just capitalism?"

Alok Vaid-Menon
The Invention of Women: A colonial history of gender

S. Bear Bergman
Special Topics in Being Human

Ian Kamau and SATE
Radio Lumi Interview with Ian Kamau and Sate

Syrus Marcus Ware
Radical Love Installation

Kai Cheng Thom
I Hope We Choose Love

Aymone Langlois
Ugly Feet, OCD, and Other Intimations of Resistance

Khadija Mbowe
"Would you rather: A Man or a Bear?"

Further Reading

- A Transmasc's Guide to Developing a Healthier Masculine Sexuality
- Balancing Privilege. Exploring Power Dynamics in Intimate Relationships
- I Could Have Escaped My Abuser Sooner If I Had Health Insurance - Chatelaine
- The Dissatisfied Sex Lives of Disabled People Suggest Bigger Social Problems - Community-Based Research Centre
- *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/argonauts
- Understanding Intimate Partner Violence in the LGBTQ+ Community - Human Rights Campaign

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