Understanding Masculinity: Explained by Lebanese Private School Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Understanding masculinity has become a topic of interest and curiosity in the academic sphere. This paper aims to tackle the issue of toxic masculinity and its forms in schools and society.

A content analysis was conducted in order to analyze previous research and to clarify concepts at hand. Also a survey on 60 male students between the age of 15 and 16 was conducted in order to delve into the struggles adolescent boys are facing regarding their masculinity.

After all, masculinity is a social construct created by man to a one size fits all concepts. This belief of masculinity needs to be abolished. Therefore, schools should work on implanting awareness programs for students and educators, in order to get them involved in the issue at hand. This involvement promises positive change in the future, because it helps adolescents understand their gender and therefore their identity.

Keywords: Mental illness; Masculinity; Adolescents; Discrimination; Manhood

INTRODUCTION

Male adolescents' poor mental health is a serious public health issue. In 2019 estimates showed that one in seven male teenagers are thought to have mental illnesses. This translates to an estimated 89 million boys worldwide. Adherence to known male gender roles strictly limits the emotions boys and men are "allowed" to express and elevates other emotions such as anger [1]. In fact most of the boys are not really demonstrating the critical nature of this issue. Most boys or even men are playing the role of a manly figure, just in order to fit with societies' definition of a man [2]. The stakeholders that are most affected in this study are the management of Antonine Sisters School Ghazir. The mentioned school was the center of the following research, due to the easy access of data and the enthusiasm of the school's management to understand their students and therefore help to make a change. The real issue is that some religious stakeholders oppose the change, because most of their beliefs are rooted into gender roles [3]. The following research is a pilot project, and the proposed strategies in this paper, if implemented, the outcome could be used and adopted on a variety of different schools.

Masculinity and mental health

An extremely important factor that the underlying factor at stake is toxic masculinity and therefore the different versions of masculinity. It is also believed that some masculinities are more strong than others, which is consistent with the idea that there are various forms of masculinity. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, or the most socially accepted version of masculinity in a given period and location, is at the top of this masculinity hierarchy [4]. In countries all over the globe, this type of masculinity is "related with being White, heterosexual, and middleclass, and possessing classic masculine attributes of assertiveness, dominance, control, physical strength, and emotional restraint" in countries all over the world [4]. Many men may aspire to this type of masculinity due to its relationship with social power and control, but few, if any, will completely attain it [5]. After all, the main reason behind mental health issues might be the striving of most men for hegemonic masculinity. For instance, the main drive of masculinity is its focus on control, strength and most importantly power. This explains why men avoid help for medical issues, given the belief that asking for aid indicates weakness or a loss of physical

control [6]. This idealized version of masculinity comes with a constrained emotionality, which is extremely harmful to mental health in particular [7].

Development of gender identity

A really important problem that adolescents find themselves tackling is: identity. One specific factor of identity development is gender. The concept "gender identity" refers to what people consider themselves. For instance, people could be feminine, masculine, or even a combination of both [8]. A crucial idea to understand is that "gender" and "sex" are not the same thing. Gender is defined by feminine and masculine roles assigned to individuals. It is built on social roles, behaviors and customs [9]. The definition of gender is based on qualities that change with respect to time and cultures. This is not the case sex. Sex is a biological term and it is always constant, because it is based on the human chromosomes. Males have the (XY) chromosomes and females have (XX) chromosomes [9]. To summarize, gender is psychological and sex is biology.

Along the early stages of adolescence, the meaning behind gender is mostly stereotyped. This explains the typical engagement of young adolescents in rigid stereotyped conduct. Usually, stereotypical behaviors are passed down from one generation to the next [4]. The real issue at hand is imbedded and rooted into the patriarchal system. Boy adolescence is driven towards gender roles and gender expectations by their fathers, brothers and grandfathers [10]. The same scenario repeats for girls, instead of males it will be there mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who will influence their nature. As individuals progress in the stages of adolescence, there gender identity becomes more flexible. They start becoming more confident and secure to engage in activities they are interested in, even if it was assigned to a different gender [10]. However due to social pressure and gender norms they will still feel that something is not right.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection

First in order to locate publications related to the topic at hand, I searched online databases on Dec 8, 2022. The search phrases included variations of male, help, masculine, men, teen, role norm, gender, adolescent, youth, boy, support, loneliness, isolation, connect, friend, peer, mental health, depress, anxious, or well-being. I also conducted a survey at a private school called Antonine Sisters School Ghazir. The survey was only relevant to male students within the age group 15-16 (adolescents). 60 male students in Grade 10 and 11 completed the survey. The survey was divided into three multiple choice questions. The aim behind the survey was to identify how adolescents perceive masculinity and how it affects their mental health. The three questions in the survey each target a certain aspect of this study. The first question targets the mental health aspect. The second targets gender roles and their effect on the students. The third question targets the origin of the problem at hand, which is the way males have been raised.

RESULTS

For decades, masculinity and manhood are concepts that adolescents struggle with. This struggle is the lead reason behind most mental health issues adolescent boys face. For instance, 21.6% (13 out of 60) of boys stated that they have been discriminated at school because they are males.

53.4% reported that they have not been discriminated at school and 25% chose the "maybe, I am not sure" option. Moreover, 80% of the participants felt that they are obligated to engage (or to refrain from engaging) in certain activities because it is inappropriate for their gender. 20% did not have this issue. Also, 35% of the participants stated that their parents teach them that all men should be have masculine characteristics and all women should have feminine characteristics.

41.6% reported having progressive parents that teach them that all genders are equal and that anybody can feel and do whatever suits them. Finally, 16% chose the "I don't know option" Table 1.

Answer opted by the students	Total No. of students praticated in the survey	Percentage
Faced male discrimination	60 Males	21.60%
Not sure about discrimination		25%
No discrimination		53.40%

Table 1: Survey results indicating about the reasons behind the mental health issues in adolescent males.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that there are 2 main types of masculinity perception: gender-normative masculinity and non-gender-normative [6]. Adolescents that abide by gender-normative masculinity tend to follow social norms and social roles assigned to being a man or a female. Those that abide by non-normative masculinity tend to distance themselves from traditional normalized characteristics of a man. These individuals tend to focus on their own values and norms [6]. The results also show that bullying and gender discrimination in schools is a real issue. 21 out of 60 stated that they have been bullied at school, because of their gender. The main reason behind this issue is that the characteristics of traditional masculinity do not apply to all boys. The bullies are taking advantage of this issue by bullying the boys that do not abide by normative masculinity characteristics, in order to establish their dominance and win the approval of other men around them [8]. Moreover, boys are obligated to obey the gender roles stuck to them at birth, which dictate every single aspect of their life. 80% of the participants stated that their decisions are highly influenced by their gender. This shows that adolescent boys are living in a struggle to make their own decisions. Further, adolescent boys learn about the characteristics of a man from the males (like fathers,

grandfathers, etc.) in their lives. For instance, 35% of the participants stated that their parents teach them that all men should be masculine, strong and cannot show weakness. This shows that gender identity and gender constructs are traditional and that they are transmitted from generation to generation [1]. Another important problem is that some adolescents don't even have the bare minimum knowledge regarding gender identity and social constructs.

For instance, 16% of the participants answered the third question of the survey by choosing the "I don't know" option. This shows that some adolescents have zero knowledge regarding gender related topics. This is an issue of utmost importance because gender is a part of a person's identity. If they are unaware of their identity, then they are unaware of who they really are. The understanding of masculinity for adolescent boys is not a topic to be taken lightly. Kimmel argues that boys are socialized and built into a limited definition of masculinity (2004). After all, adolescent boys fear being mocked and ridiculed for being feminine [11]. Kimmel also believes that in order to create gender equality, a general definition for manhood should be established. For instance, manhood is considered discrete, it is something that either a boy has or doesn't. In our culture, the idea of manhood is regarded as eternal, and it is based entirely on a man's biological composition [12]. The rigidity of what is considered masculine in a man is challenged by blurring the definition of masculinity and identifying a man in a socio-psychological sphere. Moreover, statements regarding masculinity/manhood are considered as destructive and not progressive [11]. Kimmel not only argues the definition of manhood, but also divides the stages of how men are shaped into manhood (2000). For young boys, manhood is solely based on the desire to engage in violent acts. For adolescent boys, the fear of femininity is the most contributing factor for manhood. This is the stage where boys seek approval from other boys the most [13]. When it comes to young men, they should make sure that their acts are stereotypical, their behavior should be manly and no emotions should be shown. In addition, the whole concept of manhood is an affirmation for other men in order to gain approval [10]. Men always share their accomplishments with other men seeking the approval from other men, in order to build their own masculinity [13]. This is the main reason behind sexual contests, fist fights and many other activities that men engage in, in order to establish their masculinity. After all, manhood is a homosocial rendition, since men are granted manhood based on the heroic acts and risks they engage in [13]. The definition of manhood can be looked at using a different lens. For instance, men fear being emasculated or perceived as not real men. This fear breaks the established definition of manhood, because it depicts the weakness of men. Not only does it show men as weak, it also humiliates men [11].

Consequently, men are afraid to be ashamed and therefore silence. This silence is the reason behind the ongoing loop that men are stuck in and cannot escape [14,15].

CONCLUSION

Finally, all of the articles that discussed masculinity and the following study found that boys who do not abide by the masculine roles of society reported more depression, anxiety, and loneliness as compared to their gender typical peers. This problem is extremely significant because it affects our youth and therefore the upcoming future generation of legislative men and women.

Therefore, the solutions for the issue discussed are of utmost importance and should be implemented as soon as possible. If we educate our youth and guide them on the right path, then we are working on a gender equal and better future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The perception of masculinity and its toxicity is a prominent long-lasting issue imbedded in our education systems. The problem is that toxic masculinity is a belief, it is based on the social constructs created by societies all over the globe. Therefore, in order to abolish this toxic perception of masculinity we need to start by lobbying for a change in the belief that masculinity has a set definition. This change needs to start with the youth, it needs to start in schools. First, schools should implement programs regarding sexual education. These classes should not only be about sexual activity, but also about sexual and gender identity. This introduces adolescents to a part of their identity and therefore adolescent boys can understand the basis of masculinity. The recommendation stated, if implemented correctly and in a repetitive manner can open the eyes of our younger generations to toxic masculinity and a variety of other gender discrimination issues. Another really important issue is that religious classes in schools have their own agenda. First, religion should not be obligatory for all students. Second, in religion classes, gender roles should not be discussed, because they shape the beliefs of young kids. Kids are mainly influenced by their educators at school and their parents. Therefore, not only do educators at schools need to be trained on how to deal with students having gender identity problems, but also awareness campaigns need to be implemented for parents. These awareness campaigns can be in any form of media that reaches the parents demographic, such as Facebook posts, billboards and many other media tools. Moreover, the staff in schools should be punished in case they are pursuing their own agenda. They should be respectful and they should teach all students to be respectful to one another, no matter their gender identity. An example for staff punishment could be reduction in salary or even in critical cases immediate termination. All of the strategies stated above are a small sample of what can be implanted in order to make schools a safe place for all gender identities, especially individuals that identify as non-normative.

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