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Beyond the Masculinity Trap: Reimagining Masculinity in the Kenyan Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Masculinity is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, economic structures, historical forces, and interpersonal relations. Among Kenyan men in the diaspora, it is continually negotiated at the intersection of inherited cultural expectations, migration pressures, and global gender discourses. This article introduces the concept of the masculinity trap, referring to the psychological and social constraints that arise when men are expected to conform to rigid ideals of strength, emotional control, dominance, and provider responsibility. Although these ideals include culturally valued traits such as resilience, leadership, and responsibility, their restrictive interpretation contributes to emotional suppression, limited help-seeking, chronic stress, relational strain, and maladaptive coping behaviors. Using a qualitative interpretive design and critical thematic analysis of scholarly literature, cultural narratives, and diaspora studies, the article explores how masculinity is constructed and maintained across Kenyan contexts. Findings show that migration intensifies identity tension between traditional masculine ideals and more emotionally adaptive forms of identity. The study argues for expanding masculinity to include emotional awareness, empathy, vulnerability, and shared responsibility.

KEYWORDS

Kenyan diaspora; masculinity; gender identity; hegemonic masculinity; emotional well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Masculinity is one of the most influential social identities shaping how men understand themselves, their responsibilities, and their relationships with others. While biological sex provides one dimension of identity, masculinity represents a broader social and cultural framework that defines what societies consider appropriate, desirable, and acceptable behavior for men. Scholars have long argued that masculinity is not universal or fixed; rather, it is socially produced through cultural practices, institutions, historical experiences, and interpersonal interactions (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2010; Pretorius & Rabaza, 2023).

Across many societies, masculinity has traditionally been associated with strength, independence, leadership, economic provision, protection, and emotional restraint. These qualities can provide positive foundations for responsibility and social contribution. However, when masculine ideals become rigid and narrowly defined, they may create psychological burdens by requiring men to suppress vulnerability, deny emotional needs, and maintain unrealistic expectations of self-sufficiency (Levant, 2011; Mahalik et al., 2003).

This tension creates what this article conceptualizes as the masculinity trap - a condition in which men are socially rewarded for demonstrating toughness and emotional control while simultaneously experiencing negative consequences from those same expectations. The masculinity trap operates through cultural messages that communicate that “real men” should not cry, should not ask for help, should always provide, and should endure hardship without complaint.

For Kenyan men in the diaspora, these pressures may become intensified because migration introduces additional responsibilities and identity challenges. Migration frequently requires men to negotiate multiple expectations simultaneously: maintaining cultural traditions, adapting to new social environments, achieving economic stability, supporting families across borders, and demonstrating that migration has resulted in success.

The Kenyan diaspora represents a particularly important context for examining masculinity because migration often transforms traditional gender roles. Men who were socially recognized through occupations, community positions, or family roles in Kenya may experience shifts in status and identity abroad. At the same time, they may face pressure from families and communities of origin to demonstrate economic achievement through remittances, property ownership, educational support, and visible signs of success (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). For many Kenyan men abroad, financial success becomes closely connected to masculine identity. The ability to provide is often interpreted as evidence of responsibility, maturity, and personal worth. However, when economic challenges, unemployment, relationship struggles, or emotional distress occur, some men may experience shame and isolation because they perceive these difficulties as failures of masculinity. African masculinity scholarship emphasizes that masculinities across the continent are diverse, historically situated, and continuously changing (Morrell, 2001; Ratele, 2018). African men are not defined by a single masculine identity.

Instead, masculinities emerge through complex interactions between culture, colonial histories, socioeconomic realities, family structures, and global influences.

This article contributes to this scholarship by examining how Kenyan masculinities are negotiated within diaspora contexts. Rather than presenting Kenyan cultural traditions as inherently problematic, this study recognizes that traditions often contain valuable principles of responsibility, community, and resilience. The concern arises when these values become interpreted through restrictive expectations that prevent emotional expression and healthy adaptation. The central argument of this article is that Kenyan communities can preserve cultural strengths while developing expanded understandings of masculinity that recognize empathy, emotional openness, caregiving, and psychological well-being as essential components of manhood.

Research Objectives

This article is guided by three objectives:

1. To examine how the existing literature characterizes the influence of cultural expectations of masculinity on identity formation among Kenyan men in the diaspora.
2. To synthesize evidence in the literature concerning the psychological, relational, and social consequences associated with restrictive masculine expectations among Kenyan men in diaspora contexts.
3. To identify culturally responsive approaches to reconceptualizing masculinity that retain positive values of responsibility, family, and community while promoting emotional well-being, healthy relationships, and psychological resilience.

Research Questions

The study addresses three corresponding research questions:

RQ1: How does the existing literature characterize the influence of cultural expectations of masculinity on identity formation among Kenyan men in the diaspora?

RQ2: What psychological, relational, and social consequences does the literature identify in relation to restrictive masculine expectations among Kenyan men in diaspora contexts?

RQ3: What culturally responsive approaches does the literature identify for reconceptualizing masculinity while preserving positive cultural values related to responsibility, family, and community?

Significance of Study

This study is significant because it addresses a persistent gap in scholarship and public discourse concerning men's mental health and the social construction of masculinity within African diaspora communities. While gender-focused research has extensively examined women's empowerment and structural inequalities, comparatively less attention has been directed toward how dominant masculine norms themselves function as sites of psychological distress, relational strain, and identity conflict for men (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This imbalance has contributed to the normalization of emotional restriction and help-

seeking avoidance among men, particularly within cultural contexts where masculinity is strongly tied to provider identity, emotional control, and resilience.

By conceptualizing the masculinity trap, this study advances an analytical framework for understanding how culturally valued masculine ideals—such as strength, responsibility, leadership, and endurance—can become psychologically restrictive when rigidly enforced. This is especially relevant in diaspora contexts, where men navigate competing normative systems shaped by heritage cultural expectations and host-society gender discourses. The resulting tension often manifests as gender role conflict, emotional suppression, and heightened stress, consistent with established research on masculinity-related strain and coping behaviors (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Mahalik et al., 2003; Pleck, 1995).

The significance of the study also extends to family systems, community well-being, and mental health practice. Research consistently demonstrates that restrictive masculinity norms are associated with lower help-seeking behavior, increased psychological distress, and challenges in forming emotionally expressive relationships (Vogel et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2017). By contrast, more flexible and emotionally integrated forms of masculinity are associated with improved relational functioning, more engaged fatherhood, and greater willingness to access mental health support when needed (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). In this sense, deconstructing the masculinity trap is not only a theoretical exercise but also a practical pathway toward strengthening family cohesion, enhancing parenting practices, and improving community resilience.

Furthermore, situating Kenyan masculinities within a diaspora framework contributes to broader scholarship on African identities in a globalized world. Migration literature emphasizes that mobility does not merely involve geographic relocation but also produces complex processes of identity reconfiguration, cultural negotiation, and transnational role performance (Levitt, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). For Kenyan men, this often involves maintaining culturally rooted expectations of manhood while simultaneously adapting to new gender norms encountered in host societies. This dual pressure underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of masculinity, challenging static or essentialist portrayals of African manhood and highlighting the need for more contextually grounded, intersectional analyses of gender in diaspora settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed in this study brings together research from organizational theory, leadership, cognitive psychology, and digital transformation to examine how institutional structures and individual decision-making interact to influence organizational effectiveness. The review begins with the historical development of the Peter Principle and its implications for hierarchical promotion, followed by examination of the Dunning–Kruger Effect and its relevance to self-assessment and leadership decision-making. It then considers how organizational culture, technological change, artificial intelligence, and evolving leadership competencies may reinforce or challenge these phenomena. Particular attention is given to the relationship

between promotion practices, organizational culture, competence, adaptability, and institutional productivity. By integrating these strands of literature, the review establishes the conceptual foundation for understanding how promotion–competency misalignment and cognitive bias may persist despite rapid technological change and identifies gaps that warrant further conceptual examination.

Conceptualizing Masculinity: From Biological Identity to Social Construction

Contemporary scholarship conceptualizes masculinity as a socially produced and historically situated identity rather than a fixed biological characteristic. Masculinities are constructed and reproduced through family systems, institutions, peer relationships, cultural practices, media, and broader political and economic structures (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2010; Mbah, 2023). They are therefore neither universal nor uniform. Gender intersects with ethnicity, class, geography, religion, migration status, and social position, producing multiple and sometimes competing forms of masculine identity.

Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity provides an influential framework for understanding how societies establish dominant ideals of manhood and attach social status to conformity with those ideals. Hegemonic forms commonly privilege authority, independence, competitiveness, physical strength, heterosexuality, emotional control, and economic achievement. Although relatively few men fully embody these characteristics, the ideals establish standards against which masculine legitimacy may be judged.

Recent scholarship on African masculinities reinforces this relational and contextual understanding. Mbah (2023) argues that African masculinities must be examined through intersecting categories such as age, ethnicity, race, sexuality, social position, migration, and historical context rather than treated as a singular or timeless African identity. Similarly, Bjarnesen et al. (2023) emphasize that contemporary precarity, migration, economic hardship, urbanization, and changing social relations are reshaping masculine identities across African societies.

This framework is particularly relevant to Kenyan men in the diaspora, whose masculine identities are shaped by the interaction of inherited cultural expectations, contemporary gender norms, economic demands, and migration experiences.

African Masculinities and the Kenyan Context

Scholarship on African masculinities cautions against treating the continent as culturally homogeneous. Masculine identities differ substantially across societies and are shaped by local histories, kinship systems, religious traditions, economic conditions, and changing political and social institutions (Mbah, 2023; Morrell, 2001; Morrell & Ouzgane, 2005).

Historical processes have also altered the conditions under which African masculinities are produced. Colonial economic systems, wage labor, urbanization, and migration contributed to the association between manhood, employment, household leadership, and economic provision. These transformations disrupted existing gender arrangements while establishing

new expectations concerning male authority and financial responsibility (Connell, 2005; Fanon, 1963).

Recent research demonstrates that these expectations remain subject to considerable negotiation. Kovač and Schulz (2023), for example, show that masculine identity among the Il Chamus of northern Kenya cannot be reduced to stereotypical notions of male aggression or warriorhood. Their analysis demonstrates the importance of discipline, humility, respect, and moral responsibility in local constructions of manhood.

Kenyan masculinities must therefore be understood within a changing social landscape. Cultural traditions continue to influence expectations concerning family responsibility, respect, authority, and social reputation, while education, urbanization, global media, migration, and changing family structures introduce competing models of manhood.

Masculinity, Emotional Restriction, and Mental Health

One of the most extensively documented consequences of restrictive masculine norms concerns emotional expression and psychological well-being. Expectations that men should be tough, self-reliant, emotionally controlled, and resistant to vulnerability can discourage recognition and communication of emotional distress (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Levant, 2011). Research associates restrictive masculine norms with reduced help-seeking, psychological distress, relationship difficulties, social isolation, and unhealthy coping behaviors (Mahalik et al., 2003).

Courtenay (2000) further argues that masculine identities influence health behavior by establishing norms around independence, risk, and self-reliance. Men who regard help-seeking as incompatible with masculine identity may postpone medical care, minimize psychological distress, or avoid professional support.

More recent scholarship has moved beyond treating emotional restriction as an individual psychological problem and increasingly situates masculine behavior within broader social and economic conditions. Mbah (2023) emphasizes that African masculinities are produced through intersecting cultural, political, economic, and social relations rather than through individual attitudes alone.

These dynamics have particular significance in diaspora contexts. Kenyan men living abroad may face loneliness, financial obligations, family separation, discrimination, occupational pressures, and the demands of cultural adaptation while simultaneously feeling compelled to project resilience and success. Emotional restraint may consequently function as both a cultural expectation and a strategy for maintaining social standing.

Masculinity, Migration, and Transnational Identity

Migration transforms the social context in which masculine identity is negotiated. It involves not only geographic relocation but also changes in social status, family roles, economic expectations, relationships, and cultural affiliation. Diaspora communities frequently maintain enduring social, economic, and emotional connections with countries of origin while adapting to institutions and cultural norms in countries of settlement (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Nganga et al., 2025).

Recent African masculinity scholarship places migration and mobility at the center of these transformations. Bjarnesen et al. (2023) argue that contemporary migration, economic precarity, and increased social connectivity have altered masculine roles across African societies, creating conditions in which men must continually adapt their understandings and performances of manhood.

For Kenyan men, migration may create opportunities for economic advancement, education, professional development, and personal autonomy. It can also generate substantial obligations. Remittances, financial assistance to relatives, property investment, educational support, and expectations of upward mobility may become continuing responsibilities.

Fesenmyer's (2018) study of Kenyan migrant men in London demonstrates how migration, religion, family responsibility, and masculine identity intersect. Her analysis shows that migrant Kenyan men negotiate expectations originating in both Kenya and Britain while using religious and professional identities to reconstruct their social status and masculine legitimacy.

The concept of transnational masculinity is therefore useful because it captures the simultaneous operation of multiple normative systems. Kenyan men abroad may negotiate expectations from spouses, parents, children, and extended kin in Kenya while responding to gender, workplace, and family norms in their countries of residence. Masculinity consequently becomes a transnational project shaped by obligations extending across geographic boundaries.

Masculinity and the Provider Role

Economic provision occupies a central place in many constructions of masculine responsibility. The provider role can signify commitment, protection, family devotion, and social contribution. For Kenyan men in diaspora settings, however, provider obligations may extend well beyond the nuclear family to include parents, siblings, extended relatives, and other members of the broader kinship network.

Recent scholarship on masculinity in Kenya provides particularly strong evidence for this relationship between manhood, economic pressure, and expectations of provision. Schmidt's *Migrants and Masculinity in High-Rise Nairobi* examines how male migrants in Nairobi negotiate economic aspiration, family obligations, romantic relationships, and the pressure to fulfill the breadwinner ideal. His analysis demonstrates how economic insecurity can become deeply intertwined with masculine identity and perceptions of personal worth.

The difficulty arises when provision becomes the principal measure of masculine worth. Under such conditions, unemployment, underemployment, financial instability, or an inability to meet family obligations may be experienced not simply as economic difficulties but as failures of manhood. Schmidt's analysis is particularly important because it demonstrates how the pressure to provide is embedded in broader economic structures rather than being reducible to individual attitudes or personal shortcomings.

John Henryism theory (James, 1994) provides an additional framework for understanding this pattern. Persistent high-effort coping in response to social and economic adversity may

facilitate achievement, but sustained effort under conditions of limited resources and inadequate support can carry significant psychological and health costs.

For Kenyan men in the diaspora, the provider role must therefore be understood as both a valued cultural responsibility and a potential source of psychological strain when economic performance becomes the primary basis of masculine identity.

Cultural Dimensions of Kenyan Masculinities

Kenya's cultural diversity makes any singular account of Kenyan masculinity inadequate. More than 40 ethnic communities have distinct histories, social institutions, kinship systems, and cultural practices. Cultural narratives can nevertheless provide insight into the ways masculine expectations are communicated, reinforced, and transmitted across generations.

Recent scholarship supports caution against essentializing particular ethnic constructions of masculinity. Kovač and Schulz's (2023) study of the Il Chamus demonstrates how ethnographic analysis can challenge externally imposed assumptions about African manhood. Their research shows that qualities such as discipline, humility, and respect may be central to masculine identity even where outsiders might expect warriorhood and aggression to dominate.

Agikuyu Masculinity

Among Agikuyu communities, masculine identity has historically been associated with maturity, responsibility, family leadership, and economic contribution. Cultural expressions distinguishing the roles and expectations of boys and girls have traditionally communicated different forms of social responsibility.

Such distinctions become problematic when interpreted to mean that boys must suppress fear, sadness, uncertainty, or vulnerability. The cultural value of responsibility need not require emotional silence; contemporary interpretations can preserve responsibility while expanding the emotional capacities expected of men.

Maasai Masculinity

Maasai masculine traditions have often emphasized courage, endurance, discipline, protection, and community responsibility. These values carry significant social and cultural meaning. Recent research on the Il Chamus, a Maa-speaking community in northern Kenya, illustrates the importance of avoiding simplistic representations of Maa masculinities as inherently aggressive or warrior-oriented. Kovač and Schulz (2023) demonstrate that masculine socialization may emphasize self-control, humility, discipline, and respect for elders.

This evidence complicates conventional portrayals of African masculinity and reinforces the importance of examining local meanings rather than imposing generalized assumptions about male behavior.

Luhya Masculinity

Luhya communities encompass diverse cultural traditions, but family responsibility, respect, leadership, and social contribution are important dimensions of masculine identity in many settings. Where male authority is interpreted rigidly, however, it may constrain men's participation in caregiving or discourage open emotional communication.

An expanded conception of masculine responsibility allows leadership and caregiving to coexist. Emotional engagement within the family does not diminish male responsibility; it can strengthen family relationships and intergenerational bonds.

Luo Masculinity

Luo communities have strong traditions associated with education, communication, achievement, leadership, and social reputation. These values have contributed to significant traditions of scholarship, professional achievement, political participation, and community leadership.

At the same time, Schmidt's recent ethnographic work among predominantly Luo male migrants in Nairobi illustrates how economic aspiration, relationships, family obligations, and expectations of male provision intersect in contemporary Kenyan life.

The emphasis on achievement and reputation can create pressure to maintain an image of competence and success. For men experiencing financial difficulty, personal setbacks, or emotional distress, concern about social standing may discourage disclosure and support-seeking.

Coastal Communities Masculinities

Across Kenya's coastal communities, constructions of male responsibility have often emphasized family provision, household leadership, and social responsibility. Economic hardship, unemployment, changing family structures, and shifting gender roles can challenge these expectations when men are unable to meet established standards of provision.

The changing economic and social environment creates opportunities to conceptualize family responsibility more broadly, including shared economic contribution, caregiving, and collaborative decision-making.

Kalenjin Masculinity

Kalenjin cultural traditions have placed considerable value on endurance, discipline, physical strength, achievement, and communal identity. These values are particularly visible in the international prominence of Kalenjin athletes and the cultural significance attached to athletic achievement.

When physical toughness becomes a dominant measure of masculine worth, however, men who do not conform to such expectations may experience diminished status or inadequacy. A broader conception of achievement can preserve the value of discipline and perseverance while recognizing intellectual, emotional, relational, and community contributions as dimensions of manhood.

Toward a More Expansive Understanding of Masculinity

The literature does not support the conclusion that masculinity itself is harmful. Rather, the evidence distinguishes between culturally grounded forms of masculine responsibility and restrictive constructions that narrow the range of behaviors, identities, and emotions considered legitimate for men.

Recent African scholarship increasingly emphasizes this complexity. Mbah (2023) identifies African masculinities as plural, historically situated, and continually negotiated, while Bjarnesen et al. (2023) demonstrate how economic precarity, migration, social change, and mobility generate new forms of masculine adaptation.

A more expansive understanding of Kenyan masculinity does not require the abandonment of cultural values. It requires their reinterpretation in response to changing realities of family life, migration, work, relationships, and psychological well-being. Responsibility can encompass emotional responsibility; strength can include vulnerability; leadership can involve listening and collaboration; fatherhood can extend beyond financial provision to emotional presence; and success can include health, relationships, and personal fulfillment.

The literature therefore points toward masculinity as an evolving social institution rather than a fixed cultural inheritance. For Kenyan men in diaspora contexts, this evolution is shaped by the continuing interaction of cultural traditions, migration, transnational obligations, economic realities, family relationships, and changing global understandings of gender.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the masculinity trap among Kenyan men in the diaspora requires a framework that accounts for cultural expectations, social structures, migration, economic pressures, and psychological processes. This study integrates four complementary perspectives: Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, Gender Role Conflict Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and John Henryism Theory. Together, they explain how masculine ideals are constructed, internalized, negotiated, and, when rigidly enforced, experienced as sources of psychological and relational strain.

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

Connell's (2005) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory provides the primary framework for understanding how societies establish dominant standards of manhood. Hegemonic masculinity privileges attributes such as authority, independence, emotional control, economic provision, strength, and leadership (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These expectations do not describe all men; rather, they establish standards against which masculine identity is judged.

For Kenyan men in the diaspora, such expectations may include being a primary provider, maintaining family reputation, demonstrating resilience, and managing difficulties independently. While these values can reinforce responsibility and family commitment, they may become restrictive when financial hardship, marital difficulties, or emotional distress are interpreted as failures of masculinity.

Gender Role Conflict Theory

Gender Role Conflict Theory explains the psychological consequences of restrictive masculine expectations. O'Neil (1981) argues that conflict occurs when prescribed gender roles constrain emotional expression, relationships, personal growth, or help-seeking.

For Kenyan men in the diaspora, competing expectations may be particularly pronounced. Men may be expected to provide financially while experiencing economic

insecurity, demonstrate strength while supporting others emotionally, and lead their families while having limited opportunities to express vulnerability. These contradictions can contribute to emotional restriction, relational difficulties, and reluctance to seek support (Levant, 2011; Mahalik et al., 2003).

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality Theory recognizes that masculinity is shaped by the interaction of multiple social positions (Crenshaw, 1989). Kenyan men's experiences cannot be understood through gender alone but must also be considered in relation to ethnicity, race, class, immigration status, education, generation, employment, and family circumstances.

This perspective prevents treating Kenyan men as a homogeneous group. A highly educated professional, a recently arrived immigrant, and a second-generation Kenyan American may encounter substantially different expectations and opportunities for negotiating masculine identity. Intersectionality therefore situates masculinity within broader systems of power, privilege, and social position.

John Henryism Theory

John Henryism Theory provides a framework for understanding persistent high-effort coping under conditions of adversity (James, 1994). For Kenyan men in the diaspora, this may involve working extended hours, supporting relatives through remittances, suppressing emotional distress, and maintaining an appearance of success despite economic or personal difficulties.

The concern is not resilience itself but resilience that becomes compulsory and unsupported. When men are expected to endure hardship without acknowledging vulnerability or seeking assistance, perseverance can become a source of psychological and relational strain.

Integration of the Framework

Together, these theories explain the masculinity trap as a process in which cultural expectations establish masculine standards, restrictive norms create role conflict, intersecting social positions shape how those expectations are experienced, and sustained high-effort coping reinforces them. This framework also provides a basis for examining the emergence of more flexible masculinities that retain values such as responsibility and resilience while incorporating emotional expression, shared responsibility, relational engagement, and psychological well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design informed by critical thematic analysis to examine the construction, negotiation, and reproduction of masculinity among Kenyan men in diaspora contexts. The study draws exclusively on secondary sources, integrating empirical scholarship, theoretical literature, diaspora research, and culturally embedded narratives. This approach recognizes masculinity as a historically and culturally situated social construct rather than a fixed or biologically predetermined category. Masculine identities are

produced through socialization, institutional expectations, family relationships, economic obligations, cultural narratives, and interactions across social and geographic boundaries.

An interpretivist paradigm provides the epistemological foundation for the study. Within this paradigm, meanings are understood as socially produced and historically situated rather than objectively fixed. Masculinity is therefore examined as a dynamic process through which men negotiate culturally prescribed expectations of strength, emotional control, economic provision, authority, family responsibility, and social respectability. These expectations may acquire particular significance in diaspora contexts, where men negotiate between norms associated with their Kenyan heritage and those encountered in host societies. The resulting identities may involve both continuity and contestation, as culturally established understandings of manhood are maintained, modified, or rejected.

Research Design

The research design is qualitative, interpretive, and critical. Critical thematic analysis was used to identify recurrent patterns of meaning while examining the cultural assumptions, power relations, and normative expectations embedded within representations of masculinity. The design is consistent with qualitative approaches that seek to understand how social meanings are constructed and negotiated within particular cultural and historical contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study does not treat masculinity as a measurable trait that can be adequately captured through predetermined behavioral indicators. Instead, it examines the meanings attached to masculine identity and the social conditions under which those meanings are reproduced or challenged. Particular attention is given to the intersection of cultural expectations, migration, economic responsibility, family relationships, emotional expression, and psychological well-being.

The diaspora context is analytically significant because migration can disrupt established social roles while simultaneously intensifying obligations to family and community. Kenyan men living abroad may encounter competing expectations concerning fatherhood, partnership, emotional expression, economic achievement, and individual autonomy. Masculinity consequently becomes a site of negotiation in which cultural continuity and social adaptation intersect.

Data Sources

The analysis draws upon four principal categories of secondary sources: (a) peer-reviewed empirical research, (b) theoretical and conceptual scholarship, (c) culturally embedded Kenyan narratives, and (d) diaspora and migration scholarship.

Peer-reviewed empirical research constituted the principal evidentiary base. Relevant scholarship was drawn from gender studies, African masculinities, migration and diaspora studies, psychology, family studies, and related social science disciplines. Particular attention was given to research addressing masculine identity, emotional restriction, gender-role

expectations, provider responsibility, fatherhood, intimate relationships, psychological well-being, help-seeking, migration stress, acculturation, and transnational family relationships.

Theoretical and conceptual scholarship provided the interpretive framework for examining the social production and institutional reinforcement of masculine norms. Major conceptual perspectives included hegemonic masculinity, gender-role conflict and strain, intersectionality, and stress and coping. These perspectives were not treated as interchangeable explanations but as complementary analytical lenses for examining how cultural expectations, structural conditions, social position, and psychological processes intersect in the construction of masculine identity.

Culturally embedded narratives constituted a distinct category of source material. These included Kenyan proverbs, sayings, normative messages, and culturally transmitted expectations concerning men's authority, emotional expression, economic responsibility, family leadership, fatherhood, and social conduct. Such materials were treated as cultural texts that illuminate processes of gender socialization rather than as evidence of universal beliefs held by all Kenyan communities. This distinction is particularly important given Kenya's considerable ethnic, regional, generational, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity.

The fourth category consisted of scholarship addressing migration, diaspora identity, transnational families, acculturation, remittances, and cross-border family obligations. This literature provided the contextual basis for examining how migration restructures masculine roles and expectations. It also informed the analysis of provider pressure, long-distance parenting, identity negotiation, social mobility, and the tension between public representations of success and private experiences of vulnerability.

Source Selection and Eligibility Criteria

Source selection followed a purposive, relevance-based strategy. Sources were included when they made a substantive contribution to understanding masculinity, men's gender roles, migration, family relationships, emotional expression, or related dimensions of masculine identity. Because this study is an interpretive thematic synthesis rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis, selection was guided by conceptual relevance, contextual specificity, scholarly credibility, and contribution to the developing analysis rather than by numerical representation alone.

Empirical and theoretical sources were included when they met the following criteria:

***Direct conceptual relevance*.** The source addressed masculinity, masculine identity, gender roles, emotional expression, gender-role conflict, fatherhood, provider expectations, or related dimensions of men's social experience.

***Population or contextual relevance*.** Preference was given to scholarship concerning Kenyan men, Kenyan diaspora populations, or African men in migration and diaspora settings. Broader international literature was incorporated when it provided established theoretical or empirical evidence directly relevant to the themes under investigation.

***Migration and transnational relevance*.** Studies addressing migration, diaspora identity, acculturation, transnational family relationships, remittances, long-distance parenting, or cultural adaptation were included where these processes intersected with masculine identity.

***Theoretical significance*.** Foundational scholarship was included when it provided a recognized framework for interpreting masculinity, gender relations, identity, stress, coping, or intersectionality.

***Scholarly credibility*.** Empirical evidence was drawn primarily from peer-reviewed publications and established academic sources. Foundational theoretical works were included based on their influence and relevance to the study's conceptual framework.

***Cultural significance*.** Kenyan proverbs, sayings, and cultural narratives were included when they provided substantive insight into socially transmitted expectations concerning men's behavior, authority, emotional expression, economic responsibility, or family roles.

***Analytical contribution*.** Sources were retained when they contributed to the identification, comparison, refinement, or interpretation of recurring themes.

Sources were excluded when they lacked substantive relevance to the research questions; presented masculinity solely through biological or essentialist explanations without meaningful consideration of social or cultural processes; lacked identifiable scholarly or cultural provenance; duplicated stronger evidence without adding analytical value; or concerned populations and contexts too distant from Kenyan or African diaspora experiences to support meaningful interpretation. Unsupported opinion pieces, anonymous commentary, promotional materials, and popular media were excluded from the empirical evidence base. Cultural materials were considered separately because their value derived from their role as evidence of culturally transmitted meanings rather than from conventional standards of empirical research.

This distinction between empirical evidence and cultural evidence is central to the methodological integrity of the study. Peer-reviewed research was used to establish empirical patterns and theoretical relationships, whereas cultural narratives were examined as representations of socially transmitted beliefs and expectations. Neither category was treated as universally representative of Kenyan men.

Data Analysis

The selected material was analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), with the analysis undertaken through a critical interpretive lens. The objective was not simply to catalogue recurring references to masculinity but to identify the assumptions, cultural norms, institutional expectations, and power relations through which particular forms of masculinity are constructed and sustained.

Analysis proceeded through sustained engagement with the selected sources. Texts were examined for explicit and implicit representations of masculine identity, with particular attention to emotional control, economic provision, authority, family responsibility, migration, social mobility, relational expectations, psychological distress, and help-seeking.

Initial codes were developed from recurring concepts across the source material. These included emotional restriction, provider pressure, cultural obligation, identity disruption, migration stress, relational distance, social expectations, help-seeking barriers, maladaptive coping, and adaptive masculine practices. Coding remained responsive to the data rather than being restricted to predetermined categories.

Codes were subsequently compared across source categories to identify patterns of convergence, contradiction, and variation. Related codes were consolidated into broader analytical categories and progressively refined into themes. Themes were evaluated against the source material to determine whether they represented sufficiently recurrent and conceptually coherent patterns rather than isolated observations.

The final stage involved theoretical interpretation of the themes through hegemonic masculinity, gender-role conflict and strain, intersectionality, and stress and coping perspectives. This interpretive process examined both the reproduction of restrictive masculine norms and the conditions under which those norms are contested or transformed. Particular attention was given to tensions between cultural obligation and individual well-being, economic provision and emotional presence, and cultural continuity and adaptation.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. Credibility was supported through the use of multiple categories of sources and systematic comparison of evidence across empirical, theoretical, cultural, and diaspora scholarship. Dependability was strengthened through a clearly defined process of source selection, coding, thematic development, comparison, and theoretical interpretation.

Transferability: This was addressed through detailed contextualization of Kenyan cultural expectations and diaspora experiences. Given the diversity of Kenyan communities and diaspora populations, the study avoids treating Kenyan masculinity as culturally homogeneous and instead identifies patterns that recur across the selected literature while recognizing contextual variation.

Confirmability: This was addressed through reflexive consideration of the researcher's interpretive position and the recognition that qualitative analysis necessarily involves judgment in source selection, coding, thematic construction, and theoretical interpretation. The study therefore distinguishes between claims directly supported by the literature and interpretations developed through synthesis across sources.

Methodological Limitations

The principal limitation is the study's reliance on secondary sources. Because no primary interviews, focus groups, observations, or surveys were conducted, the analysis cannot claim to represent the firsthand experiences of all Kenyan men living in diaspora settings. The findings instead constitute an interpretive synthesis of existing scholarship and culturally significant materials.

A second limitation concerns source selection. Although explicit eligibility criteria were applied, purposive selection necessarily involves researcher judgment. Different researchers may identify different bodies of literature or assign different analytical significance to particular sources. The interpretive nature of thematic analysis likewise permits alternative readings of the same material.

A third limitation concerns the uneven availability of scholarship specifically focused on Kenyan men in diaspora contexts. Where Kenya-specific evidence was limited, relevant research concerning African men, African masculinities, or migrant masculinities was considered for comparative and theoretical purposes. Such literature was not treated as direct evidence of Kenyan experience but as contextual scholarship capable of informing interpretation.

Finally, the findings should not be understood as statistically generalizable to Kenyan men as a whole. Kenya's considerable ethnic, socioeconomic, generational, regional, religious, and migration-related diversity makes any singular account of Kenyan masculinity problematic. The contribution of the study is therefore analytical rather than statistical: it identifies patterns, tensions, and transformations that provide a framework for understanding masculinity within Kenyan diaspora contexts.

Findings: A Thematic Analysis of Literature

The thematic analysis identified six interconnected themes: (1) emotional suppression as a measure of masculinity; (2) provider expectations and psychological burden; (3) migration and the intensification of masculine performance; (4) emotional restriction, marriage, and fatherhood; (5) restrictive masculinity and maladaptive coping; and (6) the emergence of expansive and adaptive masculinities. Taken together, the findings position Kenyan diaspora masculinity as culturally grounded, relational, dynamic, and contested. Across the literature, masculinity is associated with strength, emotional control, economic provision, resilience, authority, and family responsibility (Connell, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2003; Ratele, 2018). These expectations are shaped by cultural, familial, economic, and migratory contexts and may be reproduced, negotiated, or transformed over time (Morrell et al., 2012; Pasura & Christou, 2018).

The analysis therefore conceptualizes Kenyan diaspora masculinity as an ongoing negotiation between cultural continuity and social transformation. While traditional norms may reinforce identity, responsibility, and family cohesion, rigid expectations can also contribute to psychological and relational strain. At the same time, the literature points to emerging forms of manhood characterized by emotional openness, relational engagement, shared responsibility, and psychological well-being. The six themes below capture this tension between the persistence of traditional masculine norms and the emergence of more adaptive constructions of masculinity.

Theme 1: Emotional Suppression as a Measure of Masculinity

Emotional restraint emerged as a recurring feature of masculine socialization. Scholarship associates conventional masculine norms with self-reliance, toughness, emotional control, and

reluctance to display vulnerability (Connell, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2003; Levant, 2011). African-focused scholarship similarly links restrictive masculine norms with emotional suppression and reduced help-seeking (Ojore et al., 2020). Recent research with African men shows that socialization emphasizing emotional inexpressiveness and self-reliance can discourage men from discussing distress or accessing support (Sikweyiya et al., 2025).

For Kenyan men in diaspora settings, these expectations may intersect with pressures to demonstrate resilience, independence, and family responsibility. Thus, the literature suggests that emotional restraint can operate both as a culturally valued expression of strength and as a potential barrier to emotional disclosure and support-seeking.

Theme 2: Provider Expectations and Psychological Burden

Economic provision represents another prominent dimension of masculine responsibility. African masculinity scholarship frequently connects manhood with economic independence, household provision, social status, and the capacity to fulfill family obligations (Morrell et al., 2012; Ratele, 2018). Migration can extend these responsibilities across national borders, as migrants remain connected to families and communities through financial and social obligations (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Pasura & Christou, 2018).

For diaspora men, therefore, provider identity may involve supporting spouses, children, parents, and extended family while simultaneously establishing economic stability in the host country. When masculine worth becomes closely associated with financial success, economic insecurity may become a threat to identity and well-being. The literature consequently suggests that provider responsibility can be both a source of dignity and a source of psychological pressure.

Theme 3: Migration and the Intensification of Masculine Performance

Migration does not simply replace one model of masculinity with another. Research on African transnational masculinities demonstrates that migrant men often renegotiate masculine identities when familiar forms of economic, social, and patriarchal authority are disrupted (Pasura & Christou, 2018). Diaspora contexts may therefore produce hybrid forms of masculinity characterized by negotiation between cultural expectations and new social environments.

For Kenyan men, visible markers such as employment, home ownership, remittances, educational achievement, and family advancement may become evidence of successful migration. Consequently, men may experience pressure to perform success across multiple audiences—within the host society and among families and communities in Kenya. Migration can therefore simultaneously challenge and intensify established expectations of masculine success.

Theme 4: Emotional Restriction in Marriage and Fatherhood

The literature also identifies consequences of restrictive masculine norms for intimate relationships and fatherhood. Masculinity research links rigid gender-role conformity with difficulties involving emotional communication, intimacy, vulnerability, and relationship functioning (Mahalik et al., 2003; Wong et al., 2017). Transnational family research further

shows that migration can require men to renegotiate fatherhood and partnership across geographic and cultural boundaries (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024).

These findings suggest a distinction between providing for a family and being emotionally present within it. In diaspora families, geographic separation may intensify this tension. Emerging research indicates that transnational fathers may increasingly embrace more relational forms of masculinity involving emotional connection, shared responsibility, and family engagement (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024).

Theme 5: Restrictive Masculinity and Maladaptive Coping

A further theme concerns the relationship between restrictive masculine norms, distress, and coping. Research on men's help-seeking consistently identifies self-reliance, emotional control, and concerns about appearing weak as barriers to seeking psychological assistance (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Courtenay, 2000). African-focused research similarly links restrictive masculine norms with denial of psychological difficulties, emotional avoidance, and reduced help-seeking (Ojore et al., 2020).

The literature also identifies substance use, social withdrawal, and other avoidant behaviors as possible responses when distress remains unaddressed (Levant & Wimer, 2014; Seidler et al., 2018). These behaviors should not be interpreted as inherent characteristics of men; rather, they may emerge where cultural and gender expectations discourage emotional disclosure and professional support. Among diaspora populations, migration stress, isolation, financial pressure, and unfamiliarity with support systems may further complicate help-seeking.

Theme 6: Emergence of Expansive and Adaptive Masculinities

Importantly, the literature does not portray masculinity solely as restrictive. Research increasingly identifies plural, adaptive, and relational masculinities in which men retain commitments to family and cultural responsibility while expanding definitions of strength and leadership (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Ratele, 2018). African transnational masculinity research demonstrates that migration can generate new forms of masculine identity as men negotiate changing expectations and social conditions (Pasura & Christou, 2018).

Recent transnational-family scholarship similarly suggests that migration can encourage less rigid models of fatherhood and partnership, including emotional openness, shared responsibility, collaboration, and family unity (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024). The literature therefore points toward cultural continuity alongside masculine transformation, rather than a simple replacement of Kenyan values with those of Western societies.

Overall Synthesis

Taken together, the literature presents Kenyan diaspora masculinity as a dynamic process of negotiation between cultural continuity, migration, family responsibility, and changing gender expectations. Traditional ideals of strength, provision, resilience, and authority remain influential, but their meanings are increasingly contested and reconstructed.

The most significant tension identified across the literature is between masculinity as responsibility and masculinity as restriction. Family provision, resilience, and cultural

commitment can strengthen identity and social cohesion; however, when these expectations become rigidly tied to economic success, emotional silence, and self-sufficiency, they may contribute to relational and psychological strain.

At the same time, the literature identifies emerging forms of masculinity that incorporate emotional openness, engaged fatherhood, shared responsibility, relational competence, and psychological well-being. The evidence therefore supports understanding Kenyan diaspora masculinity not as a fixed cultural characteristic but as an ongoing process of adaptation, negotiation, and reconstruction across cultural and transnational contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that masculinity among Kenyan men in the diaspora is shaped through a multilayered and often contradictory interaction between cultural norms, migration experiences, economic obligations, and psychological processes. Rather than existing as a stable or internally consistent identity, masculinity operates as an ongoing negotiation in which men attempt to reconcile inherited cultural expectations with the realities of transnational living. Within this negotiation, the "masculinity trap" emerges when culturally valued attributes—such as strength, responsibility, endurance, and self-reliance—are transformed into rigid behavioral mandates that limit emotional expression, reduce help-seeking, and undermine psychological well-being.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings strongly align with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) conception of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes how dominant gender ideals become socially normalized and hierarchically enforced. In the context of Kenyan diaspora men, hegemonic masculinity is often constructed around the expectation of being a stable provider, an emotionally controlled figure, and a resilient family anchor. These expectations are not merely abstract cultural ideas; they are actively reinforced through family systems, community networks, religious discourse, and transnational obligations such as remittances and symbolic success. As a result, masculinity becomes a form of social accountability, where failure to meet expectations is not only personal but also perceived as collective or familial disappointment.

However, the findings suggest that these roles become psychologically constraining when they are interpreted as absolute requirements rather than flexible cultural ideals. Many men experience what Connell describes as the tension between "idealized masculinity" and "lived masculinity," where structural constraints such as immigration status, labor market barriers, credential recognition challenges, and high cost of living in host countries limit their ability to meet provider expectations. This disconnect produces what can be understood as identity dissonance, where men simultaneously internalize cultural ideals of success while experiencing material conditions that make such ideals difficult to achieve.

The study further reinforces Gender Role Conflict Theory (O'Neil, 1981), particularly the dimension of discrepancy strain and restriction of emotionality. Kenyan men in the diaspora frequently encounter competing demands that require them to perform strength while

experiencing vulnerability, to provide emotional and financial support while lacking reciprocal support systems, and to maintain success narratives while privately navigating instability. These contradictions generate chronic psychological tension that may manifest as anxiety, stress, withdrawal, or suppressed emotional expression. Importantly, this conflict is not simply individual but structural, shaped by culturally embedded definitions of masculinity that do not always account for the realities of migration and transnational family life.

The Diaspora Context and Masculine Identity Transformation

The diaspora context intensifies these dynamics by introducing a transnational field of identity negotiation in which masculinity must be performed across multiple social spaces simultaneously. Kenyan men abroad are often positioned at the intersection of three overlapping systems: (1) cultural expectations from their communities of origin, (2) institutional and social norms of the host country, and (3) transnational family obligations that depend heavily on economic remittances and symbolic success narratives.

Within Kenyan cultural frameworks, masculinity is frequently linked to the ability to provide materially, uphold family honor, and demonstrate resilience in the face of hardship. These expectations do not disappear in migration; instead, they are often amplified by distance, where success abroad becomes a symbolic measure of family progress and collective aspiration. Men may therefore feel compelled to perform success through visible markers such as employment stability, property acquisition, or financial remittances, even when their internal experiences reflect instability, loneliness, or psychological strain.

At the same time, exposure to host societies introduces alternative gender scripts that may emphasize emotional openness, shared caregiving, and egalitarian partnership structures. These contrasting frameworks can create cognitive and emotional dissonance but also open pathways for identity transformation. Some men begin to reinterpret masculinity through more relational and emotionally integrated lenses, particularly when exposed to environments where vulnerability is not equated with weakness but is instead understood as relational strength. This includes increased willingness to engage in co-parenting, express emotional needs, and reconsider rigid provider-centered identities.

Nevertheless, this transformation is uneven and often dependent on contextual factors such as length of migration, level of social integration, educational exposure, and access to supportive peer networks. As such, diaspora masculinity should be understood as fluid and stratified, rather than uniformly progressive or static.

Cultural Preservation Versus Cultural Transformation

A central contribution of this study is its argument that transforming masculinity does not require cultural abandonment but rather cultural re-interpretation and expansion. Kenyan cultural traditions already contain deeply embedded values that are essential to masculine identity formation, including responsibility, courage, respect, communal obligation, sacrifice, leadership, and family devotion. These values function as important sources of moral identity

and social cohesion, particularly within collectivist cultural systems where interdependence is highly valued.

The problem arises when these values are operationalized in rigid or exclusionary ways that detach responsibility from emotional well-being or equate masculinity solely with endurance and financial provision. In such frameworks, emotional expression becomes culturally suspect, vulnerability becomes weakness, and psychological distress becomes invisible. This narrowing of meaning contributes directly to the formation of the masculinity trap identified in this study.

A more expansive interpretation suggests that cultural values are not diminished by adaptation but strengthened through contextual responsiveness. Responsibility, for example, can be reconceptualized to include emotional accountability and relational attentiveness in addition to financial provision. Strength can be reframed as the capacity to endure hardship while also recognizing and articulating emotional needs. Leadership can be expanded to include empathy, active listening, and collaborative decision-making within families. Similarly, protection can move beyond economic provision to encompass the creation of emotionally safe, supportive, and communicative family environments.

This reconceptualization aligns with broader African philosophical understandings of relational personhood, where identity is not constructed in isolation but through interdependence and communal well-being. It also suggests that cultural continuity is not threatened by emotional integration; rather, it is enhanced when traditions are allowed to evolve in response to changing social, economic, and global realities.

Integrative Interpretation

Taken together, the findings suggest that masculinity among Kenyan men in the diaspora should be understood as a dynamic system of meaning-making shaped by structural constraints, cultural expectations, and psychological adaptation processes. The masculinity trap is not simply an individual cognitive distortion but a socially reinforced framework that organizes how men interpret success, failure, responsibility, and emotional expression.

At the same time, the emergence of more adaptive masculinities indicates that transformation is already occurring within diaspora spaces. These shifts reflect growing recognition that emotional well-being, relational health, and shared responsibility are not incompatible with cultural identity but are integral to sustainable forms of masculinity. This suggests that future interventions—whether educational, therapeutic, or community-based—should focus not on dismantling masculinity, but on expanding its interpretive boundaries in ways that support both cultural continuity and psychological well-being.

Implications for Kenyan Diaspora Communities

The findings of this study carry significant implications for Kenyan diaspora organizations, religious institutions, educators, counselors, and community leaders, all of whom play a critical role in shaping narratives around masculinity and well-being. Addressing the masculinity trap

requires coordinated, culturally grounded, and multi-level interventions that respond to both individual experiences and broader community norms.

Mental Health Initiatives

Mental health programs should directly engage with cultural beliefs that shape masculinity and influence attitudes toward help-seeking. Community messaging needs to consistently reinforce the idea that counseling is not a sign of weakness, but rather an act of awareness and responsibility. Emotional awareness should be reframed as a marker of maturity, while seeking support should be understood as a demonstration of strength and accountability rather than failure. In addition, mental health services must be culturally responsive, taking into account immigrant experiences, transnational family obligations, and the cultural values that shape identity and behavior within Kenyan diaspora communities.

Men's Support Networks

There is also a strong need for structured spaces within Kenyan diaspora communities where men can openly engage in dialogue about lived experiences and everyday challenges. Such spaces should provide opportunities to discuss marriage and relationships, parenting, financial stress, immigration-related pressures, emotional well-being, and broader processes of identity transformation. Importantly, these networks should not be framed around blame or criticism, but rather as supportive environments grounded in growth, accountability, reflection, and mutual encouragement.

Fatherhood and Family Programs

Programs designed to support fathers should broaden conventional understandings of fatherhood beyond economic provision. While financial responsibility remains important, healthy fatherhood also involves emotional availability, effective communication, affection, guidance, and consistent presence in children's lives. Children benefit most from fathers who are able to integrate strength with compassion, thereby modeling balanced, supportive, and emotionally engaged forms of masculinity.

Education of Boys and Young Men

Addressing the masculinity trap effectively requires early and intentional intervention during childhood and adolescence. Families and schools should actively teach boys that emotions are an inherent part of being human, that seeking help reflects courage rather than weakness, and that respect is earned through character and behavior rather than dominance or control. Boys should also be guided to understand that caring for others is a form of strength, and that vulnerability and responsibility are not contradictory but can coexist as essential aspects of healthy development.

Limitations

This study has several important limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the article is based on a qualitative interpretive approach that draws primarily on existing scholarly literature and cultural analysis rather than on primary empirical data. As a result, it does not include direct lived experiences gathered through interviews, focus groups,

or surveys with Kenyan men in the diaspora. While this approach allows for a broad conceptual and theoretical exploration of masculinity, it limits the ability to capture the depth, nuance, and variability of individual lived experiences. Future research would therefore benefit from empirical studies that center the voices of Kenyan men in diaspora communities through qualitative and mixed-method designs.

Second, the study must be read with an awareness of Kenya's significant cultural diversity. Masculine identity is not uniform across Kenyan communities, and experiences vary widely depending on ethnicity, generation, socioeconomic status, migration pathway, religious background, and geographic location. These intersecting factors shape how masculinity is understood, performed, and negotiated both within Kenya and in diaspora settings. Consequently, any broad interpretation of "Kenyan masculinity" risks oversimplification, and future research should more deliberately account for this diversity through comparative and context-specific studies.

Third, the focus of this article leans more heavily toward examining the challenges associated with restrictive or traditional constructions of masculinity, particularly those that contribute to emotional suppression and help-seeking barriers. While this focus is important for identifying areas of concern, it does not fully capture the breadth of positive masculine expressions present within Kenyan communities. Many Kenyan men actively demonstrate forms of masculinity rooted in caregiving, ethical leadership, sacrifice, mentorship, and community engagement. These strengths are acknowledged but not explored in sufficient depth in this analysis.

Finally, this study is grounded in a framework that seeks to problematize restrictive masculinity, but in doing so it risks emphasizing a deficit-oriented perspective. Masculinity, however, is not solely defined by its challenges or limitations. It also includes resilience, adaptability, cultural pride, and constructive forms of identity formation. Future scholarship should therefore strive for a more balanced approach that examines both the difficulties and the strengths embedded within Kenyan masculine identities, particularly in diaspora contexts where identity negotiation is especially dynamic.

CONCLUSION

The masculinity trap represents a profound and persistent challenge for many Kenyan men navigating life in the diaspora. At its core, it reflects a deep contradiction: men are expected to embody strength, stability, and resilience, yet are often socialized into environments where expressing vulnerability, uncertainty, or emotional distress is discouraged or even stigmatized. This tension does not simply shape behavior; it shapes identity, relationships, and mental well-being, often forcing men to perform strength externally while experiencing isolation internally. However, the central argument of this article is that the solution is not the rejection of masculinity or the abandonment of cultural tradition. Rather, it lies in the intentional expansion and redefinition of what it means to be a man within both Kenyan cultural frameworks and

diaspora realities. Cultural traditions, when engaged critically and constructively, already contain the foundations for such transformation. The task is to recover, amplify, and broaden those elements that affirm humanity rather than suppress it.

A more expansive and healthier Kenyan masculinity is one that recognizes emotional expression not as weakness, but as emotional intelligence and strength; compassion not as softness, but as leadership in action; vulnerability not as failure, but as courage in its most honest form. It is a masculinity that understands fatherhood not only as provision, but as presence; that views seeking help not as dependency, but as wisdom; and that defines success not only through financial or social achievement, but through holistic well-being, relational health, and inner stability.

In this reimagined framework, masculinity is no longer anchored in performance—where manhood must constantly be proved, defended, or displayed—but in authenticity, where manhood is lived through honesty, self-awareness, and relational responsibility. This shift requires moving from the pressure to appear strong toward the freedom to be human.

Ultimately, a strong man is not defined by the absence of struggle, but by his capacity to engage struggle with honesty, humility, and courage. He is one who can acknowledge pain without shame, seek support without fear, love without emotional restriction, and continue growing even in the face of uncertainty. In this sense, strength is not the denial of humanity but the full acceptance of it.

Recommendations

The following recommendations build on the analysis of masculinity, diaspora identity, and help-seeking behaviors, and are grounded in established literature on masculinity, mental health, and migration. They are intended to support culturally responsive, strengths-based, and sustainable interventions within Kenyan diaspora communities.

Establish Culturally Responsive Mental Health Programs

Kenyan diaspora organizations should collaborate with mental health professionals to design and implement culturally responsive mental health programs that reflect the lived realities of migration, identity negotiation, and transnational family obligations. Research consistently shows that masculine norms emphasizing emotional restriction are associated with lower help-seeking and poorer mental health outcomes (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Courtenay, 2000).

These programs should address key challenges including depression, anxiety, migration-related stress, relationship difficulties, financial pressure, and identity struggles. At the same time, they should actively work to reduce stigma by reframing mental health care as a form of responsibility, self-awareness, and adaptive coping rather than weakness or failure. Help-seeking should be normalized as a strength-based behavior consistent with positive psychological functioning and resilience (Vogel et al., 2007).

Develop Kenyan Men's Wellness and Dialogue Spaces

Community organizations should create structured, consistent, and safe spaces where men can engage in open dialogue about their lived experiences without fear of judgment or social

penalty. Evidence from men's mental health scholarship suggests that peer-based, non-clinical environments can improve emotional expression and reduce isolation among men who are otherwise reluctant to seek formal services (Seidler et al., 2016).

These wellness spaces should promote brotherhood, accountability, emotional literacy, and relational development. They should also support men in developing healthier coping strategies and communication skills, particularly in response to the pressures of migration, role strain, and identity transformation. Such spaces can function as culturally congruent entry points into broader mental health support systems (River, 2018).

Expand and Reframe Fatherhood Development Programs

Fatherhood programs should move beyond narrow definitions of masculinity that prioritize economic provision while neglecting emotional engagement. Research on father involvement consistently demonstrates that children benefit most from fathers who are emotionally available, communicative, and relationally engaged, in addition to being financially responsible (Lamb, 2010).

Programs should therefore emphasize the integration of provision and presence, reinforcing the idea that effective fatherhood includes emotional warmth, guidance, affection, and consistent involvement in children's lives. This broader conceptualization of fatherhood aligns with emerging global scholarship that positions nurturing fatherhood as a key dimension of child well-being and family stability (Pleck, 2010).

Promote and Institutionalize Positive Male Role Models

Diaspora communities should intentionally identify, support, and elevate men who embody balanced and healthy forms of masculinity. These role models should reflect values such as integrity, compassion, humility, emotional maturity, and service to others.

Social learning theory suggests that individuals, particularly young people, construct identity through observation and imitation of role models within their social environment (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, increasing visibility of positive masculine models is critical for reshaping gender norms and expanding the range of acceptable masculine identities. By amplifying such examples, communities can actively counter restrictive narratives of masculinity and support healthier developmental pathways for young men.

Strengthen and Expand Future Research Agendas

Future research should build upon this conceptual foundation by engaging directly with the lived experiences of Kenyan men across diverse diaspora contexts. Empirical research in masculinity studies highlights the importance of intersectional and context-sensitive approaches that account for ethnicity, migration history, socioeconomic status, and generational differences (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Particular attention should be given to the relationship between masculinity and mental health outcomes, variations in help-seeking behavior across generations, and the effectiveness of culturally grounded community interventions. Comparative studies across different host countries would also provide valuable insight into how structural and cultural environments

shape masculine identity transformation over time. Longitudinal research designs would be especially valuable in tracking changes in identity, well-being, and relational patterns across the migration life course.

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