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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

APHRC   African Population and Health Research Center
CAR   Central African Republic
CSR   Center for Social Research
DRC   Democratic Republic of Congo
EMAP   Engaging Men on Accountable Practices
FGD   Focus Group Discussion
FGDs   Focus Group Discussions
GBV   Gender-Based Violence
HPs   Harmful Practices
IDI   In-depth Interview
IRB   Institutional Review Board
KII   Key Informant Interview
MOGCSW   The National Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare
NMoH   National Ministry of Health South Sudan
PM   Positive Masculinity
SGBV   Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SSA   Sub-Saharan Africa
UNFPA   United Nations Population Fund
VAWG   Violence Against Women and Girls
WHO   World Health Organisation

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Masculinity: The prominent model used to define masculinity in a society or part of a society as a set of attributes, behaviors, and roles associated with men and boys. It has implications on how to be a man as well as male sexual desires and pleasures[1].

Positive masculinity is defined as a concept that challenges the narrow and harmful stereotypes of what it means to be masculine and promotes healthy behaviors, emotions, and values [2].

Gender-based violence: This can be defined as violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately[3]

Violence against women and girls: Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life[4].

Intimate partner violence: Behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behavior [5].

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

Harmful practices: These are persistent practices and behaviors that are grounded on discrimination based on sex, gender, age, and other grounds as well as multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering[6].

Facilitators of positive masculinity: These are enablers, factors, or approaches aimed to promote men's involvement as equitable, engaged, non-violent fathers, partners, and allies for the eradication of gender-based violence, violence against women and girls, sexual gender-based violence, and harmful practices in the achievement of gender-equality, and the promotion of family health and well-being.

Barriers to positive masculinity: On the other hand, these are approaches that hinder the elimination of Violence against women and girls, sexual gender-based violence, and harmful practices.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Positive Masculinity (PM) programs present an opportunity to challenge unequal gender norms and other barriers that hinder the elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and harmful practices (HPs) in South Sudan. While there are positive masculinity programs engaging men and boys to end VAWG in South Sudan, studies assessing community perceptions of masculinity norms, challenges of engaging men and boys, and effects of positive masculinity programs are scarce. Such studies are needed to further inform approaches and strategies to engage men and boys to end VAWG and HPs.

Study objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the role of positive masculinities and male engagement in the elimination of violence against women and girls in South Sudan. The study addressed the following specific objectives:

1. To explore stakeholders' (policy makers, community leaders, program beneficiaries, and community members) perspectives on masculinity and its link to VAWG in South Sudan.
2. To examine the facilitators of and barriers to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/ SGBV/HPs in South Sudan.
3. To document a case study of an intervention perceived to be most effective in enhancing the involvement of men and boys in programs to end/prevent violence against women and girls/ SGBV/HPs in South Sudan.

Methods

This was an explorative qualitative study conducted in two Payams (administrative division) of Luri and Munuki Payams in Juba City, South Sudan among men and women aged 18 years and above. Participants were selected purposively with the help of Engaging Men on Accountable Practices (EMAP) program facilitators. The field researchers collected data from diverse stakeholders, including policymakers (n=11), community members (n=80), community leaders (n=9), and program beneficiaries (n=20) through Key Informant Interviews (n=11), Focus Group Discussions (n=8) and In-depth Interviews (IDI) (n=29). Data were transcribed and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis.

Findings

Community conceptions of masculinity in South Sudan

The ideal type of masculinity in South Sudan, according to the participants, was traditional masculinity expressed through benevolent patriarchy, leadership, problem resolution, independence, physical strength, and commitment to community development. Even though traditional masculinity is valuable and firmly ingrained, participants observed a shift towards positive masculinity, which manifests via respect, embracing gender equality, emotional intelligence, and non-violence. Participants in every interview reaffirmed that a real man protects, provides, and upholds cultural values; in contrast, a weak man is seen as a jobless slob who is emotionally immature, violent, disrespectful, and unable to support his family.

Both traditional and positive masculinity can coexist because positive masculinity is not a rejection of traditional masculinity but a rejection of negative masculinity. In the South Sudanese community, negative masculinity manifests itself in several ways, including forced early marriage, opposing women's education, emotional insecurity, abusing power, disregarding women's voices, abusing substances, violence, oppressing women, and failing to fulfill family obligations. Masculinity norms are learned and internalized

through family upbringing, cultural traditions, observational learning, parental influence, community expectations, and personal experiences. The pressure to conform to masculinity norms can have a detrimental effect on men as men often struggle with feelings of inadequacy, depression, and anxiety due to their inability to meet these expectations.

Links between negative masculinity and VAWG

The root cause of VAWG, according to interviewees, is negative masculinity beliefs that subjugate women. VAWG flourishes in an environment that is fostered by toxic masculinity norms that limit women's autonomy and decision-making. The belief that men are superior to women diminishes respect for women and helps create a culture that is supportive of VAWG. Because of negative masculinity beliefs that subjugate women, men's use of violence to control and dominate women is justified and normalized, particularly in rural areas of South Sudan. For example, in rural settings, women are viewed as property, purchased with a high bride price, a perspective that leads to the oppression of women and girls. Women who have experienced intimate partner violence are counseled to endure rather than report it to authorities.

Barriers to harnessing positive masculinity to end VAWG

While interviewees alluded to the need to tackle negative masculinity through gender-transformative positive masculinity programs, they also identified barriers hindering such efforts. These barriers include difficulties in changing deeply entrenched gender norms, skepticism about gender equality programs, the perception that gender equality is a foreign concept, resistance and backlash to change, inadequate funding, and men's busy schedules.

Facilitators of harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG

Participants highlighted several approaches to enable the harnessing of positive masculinity to end VAWG. These approaches include: funding gender transformative programs targeting men and boys, leveraging activities such as sports and vocational training in the community to reach men and boys, holding dialogues, workshops, and seminars to educate men and boys, including empowerment initiatives as part of the programs, engaging men at the community level, raising awareness in schools, churches, mosques, universities and having men as role models and gender champions in positive masculinity programs.

Engaging Men through Accountable Practices (EMAP)

Educational initiatives such as Engaging Men through Accountable Practices (EMAP) play a crucial role in promoting positive masculinity toward ending VAWG. This program is designed to enlighten men about the importance of violence prevention and the principles of gender equality. It uses interactive engagement methods such as community action groups and male-centric activities, like cooking challenges, to cement learning experiences. T

he interactive engagement approach serves as a practical re-education tool and helps to foster a sense of camaraderie and accountability among participants. This community-centric approach serves to not just educate but also actively engage men and boys in a manner that resonates with their daily lives, creating an impactful and enduring shift towards a more gender-equal society. The EMAP intervention has a profound impact, ushering in heightened awareness, altered perceptions, and transformative behavioral shifts related to masculinity according to the program beneficiaries. Beneficiaries reported increased knowledge of gender-based violence and change of perceptions and adoption of gender equitable views and practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examines the role of positive masculinities and male engagement in the elimination of violence against women and girls in South Sudan. The findings illustrate masculinity demonstrated through benevolent patriarchy, protection, physical strength, leadership and contribution to community development is the ideal expression of masculinity in South Sudan. While traditional masculinity is ingrained, there is a notable shift, especially among well-educated urban South Sudanese, towards positive masculinity, which is shown through embracing gender equality, emotional intelligence, and non-violence. The root cause of VAWG is toxic masculinity, which is more prevalent in rural areas than urban areas and endorses early marriage, opposes women's education, instills emotional insecurity, abuses power, ignores the voices of women, abuses substances, uses violence, oppresses women, and neglects family responsibilities.

Recommendations for promoting positive masculinity and ending VAWG

The study's participants made suggestions on how to promote positive masculinity in South Sudan. The recommendations address the intersection of cultural context and societal norms and involve participation from the government, community leaders, CSOs, and individuals. These recommendations collectively aim to create a holistic and contextually relevant approach, involving key stakeholders for the successful implementation of positive masculinity interventions in South Sudan. The recommendations are as follows:

Develop a national policy, action plan, and structures for advancing positive masculinities

Participants recommended that the Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare (MOGCSW) should develop a comprehensive national policy to advance positive masculinities in the country. This policy should encompass well-defined action plans, outlining specific steps and timelines for effective implementation. Concurrently, the establishment of dedicated structures or task forces becomes imperative. These entities would be responsible for overseeing and coordinating the multifaceted initiatives outlined in the policy, ensuring a streamlined and impactful approach to fostering positive masculinity. To solidify the commitment to positive masculinity, the MOGCSW should advocate for the integration of specific components into existing policy documents. Amendments to documents such as the Anti-GBV Bill and the Family Bill should explicitly address and enhance women's empowerment through the promotion of positive masculinities. By intertwining these principles into legal frameworks, a comprehensive approach to fostering gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls is achieved.

Design and implement a communication strategy for raising awareness about positive masculinities:

Recognizing the transformative power of communication, the MOGCSW should collaborate with experts and organizations to craft a targeted strategy for raising awareness about positive masculinities. This strategy should leverage diverse channels, including media, community outreach programs, and educational institutions, to disseminate information and stimulate crucial discussions. An essential aspect of this strategy involves incorporating culturally sensitive messaging to resonate effectively with diverse audiences, fostering a nuanced understanding of positive masculinity. It is critical to create educational programs that respect local traditions and align with local practices. This increases the relatability of the positive masculinity message. To develop an acceptable plan for awareness campaigns, MOGCSW should collaborate closely with NGOs, the Ministry of Information, and other relevant parties. The networks of youth organizations, community leaders, and NGOs should be tapped into for this initiative in order to reach a wider audience with messages of positive masculinity.

Develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for policy implementation

Integral to the success of the proposed policy is the establishment of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework. In collaboration with relevant stakeholders, the MOGCSW should design a framework with clear key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarks. These metrics will serve as essential tools for assessing the policy's effectiveness and the impact of associated programs. Regular evaluations, coupled with strategic adjustments based on monitoring results, will ensure a dynamic and adaptive approach, promoting continuous improvement.

Engage religious and community leaders to empower communities

Recognizing the influential roles of religious and community leaders, the MOGCSW should facilitate dialogues and workshops with them to secure their support for positive masculinities. These engagements should encourage the integration of positive masculinity principles into religious teachings and community norms, leveraging the influence of these leaders to promote transformative cultural shifts. The MOGCSW launched a community-led awareness campaign to disseminate information about positive masculinity. Using local leaders to share information about positive masculinity will resonate with the people resulting in better acceptance. By sharing their knowledge, they may enrich the programs and strengthen their ties to South Sudanese culture.

Invest in educational programs

Education stands as a potent tool for societal change. Collaborating with the Ministry of Education, the MOGCSW should advocate for the integration of educational programs promoting positive masculinities into school curricula. Additionally, training educators on delivering gender-sensitive content challenging traditional stereotypes will ensure that educational institutions become catalysts for positive change.

Allocate budgetary resources

For the proposed initiatives to materialize, the MOGCSW must advocate for dedicated budgetary resources. The financial allocation should support awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and capacity-building programs. By securing these resources, the MOGCSW will ensure tangible implementation of the national policy on positive masculinities, marking a significant step toward fostering a culture of respect, equality, and non-violence in South Sudan.

Building strong partnerships with NGOs

To realize a bigger impact, participants suggested that the MOGCSW team up with local NGOs. These organizations know the community well, so working together will make positive masculinity programs more effective.

Focus on youth

The youth are the key to change. MOGCSW should plan activities that focus on gender equality, fairness, and healthy relationships for them. Working with the younger generation may contribute to transforming views and attitudes for the better. With the help of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, MOGCSW can plan and run special programs for the youth to promote positive masculinity in order to create a better and fairer society.

INTRODUCTION

Unequal socio-cultural norms significantly encourage power imbalances between men and women [7]. The unequal social norms—steered by negative masculinity—have continuously defined decisions and behavior that undermine gender-equitable relations[8] and indirectly promote violence against women and girls (VAWG). The dominant patriarchal ideology, which alludes to men as holding a high status in society, has derailed efforts to achieve gender equality and rendered women and girls vulnerable to exploitation. For instance, men who hold inequitable gender norms are more likely to be at higher risk of perpetrating violence and harmful practices toward women and girls [9]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between 30% and 38% of women globally have suffered from physical or sexual violence or both from the person with whom they had an intimate relationship. About 6% of sexual assaults on women and girls had been committed by someone else other than their ex-husband or boyfriend or another intimate partner.

Women in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) experience some of the highest GBV prevalence rates globally. It is estimated that 45% of women in SSA have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from intimate and non-intimate partners since the age of 15[10]. Comparing global prevalence to that of SSA shows that VAWG/GBV is more endemic in the SSA region. Across SSA, the highest prevalence rates come from central Africa, home to politically troubled states of DRC, Central African Republic, Burundi, and Chad, with an estimated 66% of ever-partnered women having experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner[4]. East Africa has some of the highest prevalence rates of VAWG/GBV as well. In 2018, a study that investigated VAWGs among the ever-married/partnered women aged 15–49 found that 47% of women in DRC, 45% in Uganda, 41% in South Sudan, and 38% in Kenya had been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence from a current or former husband or male intimate partner[11].

South Sudan is made up of sixty-four (64) tribes with varied cultures that are generally patriarchal, many of which tend to accept violence and harmful practices against women and girls. According to programmatic reports (GBV-IMS), physical assault (37%) is the most prevalent type of GBV in South Sudan, followed by rape (19%) [12]. The Pandora Project (2009) reports a 40% GBV prevalence in the whole country. While GBV is considered pervasive in the country, women and girls seem to suffer more. A humanitarian needs overview shows that 97% of those affected by GBV are females. [13] The situation is further exacerbated by over 20 years of brutal conflict with over two million lives lost and a vast majority of women and girls [14] being disproportionately affected by these conflicts and suffering grave consequences, including injuries, pain, and trauma.

Violence against women and girls has wide-ranging negative consequences, both at individual and societal levels. Primarily, it violates human rights, creates health crises, and impedes development. Considered a public health crisis, VAWG/ GBV causes injuries, pain, and trauma to the victims. Violence

against women and girls is a developmental concern because it threatens the achievement of SDGs that promote gender equality and women empowerment. At the household level, GBV limits women's choices, productivity, and bargaining power with their intimate partner. Thus, due to the threat of GBV, women cannot engage in economic activities outside their homes which could lead to poverty and further conflict. In a meta-study, low education, lack of employment, growing up in an environment with gender-based violence, substance and alcohol abuse, mental health, men in multiple intimate relationships, history of child and family abuse, limited decision-making skills, and younger age were found to be risk factors that make one more likely to experience VAWG/GBV at personal or at the family level[11].

Over the years, efforts to change the socio-cultural norms that drive VAWG in Africa have been largely led by women's movements with the voices of men invisible. However, there is an increasing recognition of the need to engage men and boys to address VAWG. Programs engaging men to end VAWG –also known as positive masculinity interventions–are increasingly engaging men and boys, not only to change their inequitable sociocultural norms and beliefs but also as agents of change[15]. Emerging evidence from such interventions has demonstrated that active and meaningful engagement of men and boys is essential in achieving gender parity because men play an important role in challenging the patriarchal beliefs and practices that disadvantage women in society [16]. Well-designed interventions with men and boys that employ gender transformative approaches to establish gender equitable relationships have proven to be more effective in influencing positive behavior change and attitude transformation towards VAWG/GBV[8].

To accelerate evidence-informed advocacy and policy-making efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls and harmful practices in Africa, theSIARP, through UNFPA ESARO and implementing partners (a consortium comprising the African Population and Health Research Center, the Population Council-Kenya, and the SUDD Institute, South Sudan implemented a pilot study in South Sudan to explore the facilitators and barriers to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG. Limited studies have assessed positive masculinity programs and interventions in South Sudan. Thus, there is a need to further explore and establish how best the process of male engagement can be facilitated and supported to the full realization of gender equality between men and women. As such, evaluation of positive masculinity interventions is imperative to inform the design and implementation of similar interventions in different African contexts.

Study Objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the role of positive masculinities and male engagement in the elimination of VAWG in South Sudan.

Specific objectives

The study addressed the following specific objectives:

1. To explore stakeholders' (policy makers, community leaders, program beneficiaries, and community members) perspectives on masculinity and its link to VAWG in South Sudan.
2. To explore the facilitators and barriers to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG/SGBV/HPs in South Sudan.
3. To document a case study of an intervention perceived to be most effective in enhancing the involvement of men and boys in programs to end/prevent violence against women and girls/SGBV/HPs in South Sudan.

Theoretical Framework

This research drew on Urie Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework to understand how positive masculinity impacts VAWG; and how male engagement interventions could be a useful programmatic approach to eliminating VAWG[17]. Hegemony reinforces male dominance over women asserting control and subordination[18]. This socio-ecological framework emphasizes the role of context in understanding

behaviors and looks at the individual, the individual's environment, and the interactions of the individuals with their environment and vice versa. The framework refers to the context in four nested aspects of the ecosystem—micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems. Microsystems are the patterns of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations in a given face-to-face setting and include interactions with family, peers, and partners that influence behavior. The interactions between the micro-systems to influence beliefs and behaviors create the mesosystem. Mesosystems are mainly referred to as the "linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings''. Exo-systems refer to structures that impact one's behavior indirectly through interacting with microsystems and may include neighborhood contexts and community norms[19].

The macro-systems refer to broad structures, such as culture, religious affiliations, ethnicity, laws and policies, and education systems that police behaviors. Using the socio-ecological approach is important in grasping the different levels and layers of interactions that influence positive masculinities and that are important in designing and implementing programs aimed at ending VAWG[20]. Following the socio-ecological framework, this study has three main goals. First, it looks into what different stakeholders, like policymakers, community leaders, and the general population, think about masculinity and how it's connected to VAWG, HP, and SGBV in South Sudan. Second, the study explores what facilitates and impedes the use of positive masculinity to eliminate VAWG/HP/SGBV. It considers things happening in small groups, larger communities, and outside influences. Lastly, the study examines how best to get men involved in programs that address violence against women and girls. By looking at all these aspects through the socio-ecological lens, the study aims to understand the whole picture crucial to creating effective programs that fit the specific culture and situation in South Sudan.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

This study employs a qualitative explorative design, using three qualitative data collection methods: key informant interviews (KIIs), in-depth interviews (IDI), and focus group discussions (FGDs) to examine how positive masculinity affects VAWG/SGBV/HPs and how male engagement can be a helpful tool in the elimination of VAWG in South Sudan.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Juba, the capital city of South Sudan. Juba is a semi-urban town where national policy makers and gender equality and GBV programs are concentrated[21]. The data collection was conducted in two areas central to Juba city (Munuki and Luri) chosen based on the programs implemented by Men4Women South Sudan.

Figure 1: A map of Juba County, Central Equatoria State- Showing Study Areas[21]
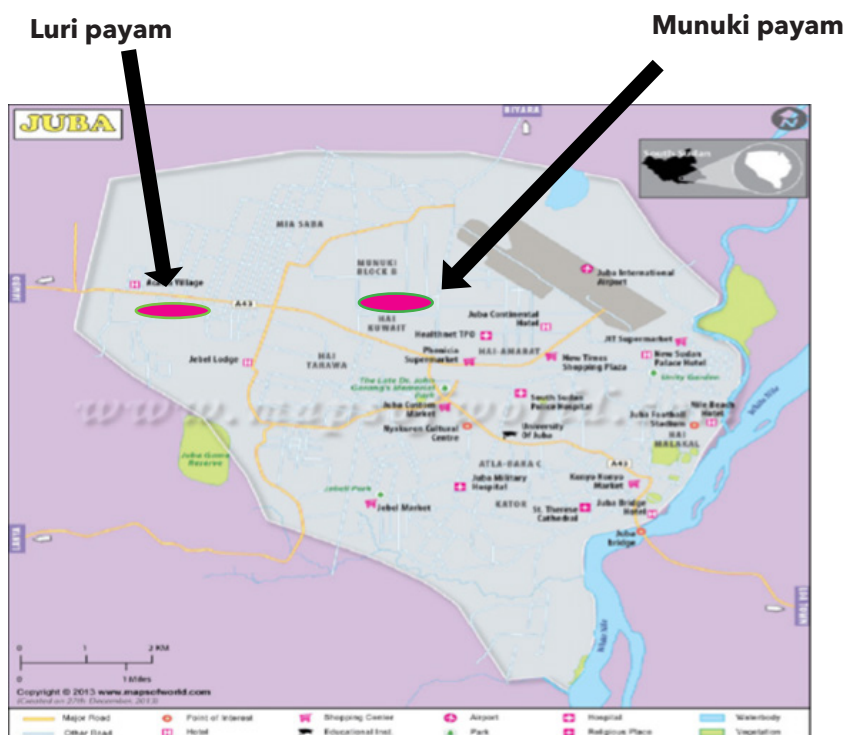
Study Population

The population of interest was adult community members (men and women aged 18 years or older), program beneficiaries that included men and women above the age of 18, community and religious leaders, representatives of community-based organizations, local government authorities, and national-level policymakers and program implementers.

Participant Selection

The selection of participants was purposive. Specifically, the study participants were purposively sampled as follows:

Community leaders were identified from Munuki and Luri Payams communities based on their key roles as cultural and religious leaders, leaders of community-based organizations, and local government authorities. These members are usually the entry points to any community in South Sudan.

Community members were pre-identified by the community leaders considering their active participation in community activities. These community members were grouped as 8-10 members making up the FGD.

Key informants were purposely identified based on their roles in formulating policies or implementing programs related to gender, women's rights, or engaging men in the elimination of VAWG and harmful practices.

Program beneficiaries were predetermined with the help of implementers of programs that engage men in the elimination of VAWG and harmful practices and the promotion of women's rights. They included those who were targeted by programs that support male engagement in the elimination of VAWG, SGBV, and harmful practices. Since South Sudan is not a country directly supported by the Spotlight Initiative, all participants were chosen based on Juba's Men4Women's positive masculinity male engagement initiative. A full description of participants' recruitment is shown in Table 1.

Table1: Participants description

Category	Sample size	Comments
Key Informants	11	National Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare officials, Members of Parliament (n=3), Police (n=2), Program implementers (n=4), and some local administrators (n=2). 8 men and 3 women involved in interventions for VAWGs and Gender issues were interviewed.
Community Leaders	9	Islamic leaders (Sheikhs) (n=1), Chiefs (n=5), Leaders of local Community Based Organizations (n=1), School Administrators (n=1), and Church leaders(n=1). (1 female and 8 men) engaged with Engaging Men on Accountable Practices (EMAP)
Community Members (FGDs)	80	35 men and 45 women from community members were; equally divided [by gender] into 8 FGDs each consisting of 8- 10 individuals with no age specifications.
Program Beneficiaries	20	These were 10 men and 10 women who participated in the EMAP project, which engages men and promotes positive masculinity under Men4Women and UNFPA South Sudan.

Ethical Considerations

All national and state-level protocols were followed before the start of fieldwork. Sudd Institute applied for and was granted ethical clearance by the South Sudan Police Service (SSPS), the National Ministry of Health, and the National Security and Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The South Sudanese Ministry of Health's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved and reviewed the study before it could be carried out. Participants signed an informed consent form outlining the ethical guidelines that the researchers followed.

Each participant was provided with information about the project, how the data would be used, and participants' fundamental rights. Data were anonymized and all responses were kept confidential. Data were used for intended purposes. The project team ensured data collection took place in safe spaces and there were no security risks to participants. Participants were also provided with contact numbers to call if they had any questions or concerns regarding the study.

Additionally, several protection measures for both participants and researchers were considered in this study. These included pairing participants with field interviewers of the same gender. Participants were allowed to reschedule interviews or relocate interview venues when necessary. Interviews were discontinued, postponed, and rescheduled when interruptions occurred.

Such interruptions included when a participant did not want to continue with the interview for varied reasons, and instances of distress. Where participants expressed distress, they were guided to referral services within Munuki and Luri Payam. The research team was trained on how to identify signs of distress and instructed on how to address the situation and refer participants for counseling when necessary. For the wellbeing of the researchers, psychosocial counseling was available and they were also allowed to take a break/time off if needed.

Data Collection

Four field researchers (two males and two females) were recruited to conduct data collection and underwent a 5-day fieldwork training. Fieldwork training focused on positive masculinity and male engagement concepts, research ethics and consent procedures, review of interview guides, and adaptation with translation exercises for Juba Arabic. The pre-testing of the tool was done as part of the training Enumerators tested the tool with two participants each and provided feedback to improve the data collection tools. Data collection commenced on the 19th of September 2023 and took place over a period of 10 days.

To gain community entry, field researchers introduced the study and its aims to chiefs and community leaders of the study sites (Munuki and Luri Payams), and participants were thereafter identified. Data collection involved: FGDs with community members, IDIs with community leaders, KIIs with policymakers and program implementers, and IDIs with EMAP program beneficiaries. Each data collection method used a specific structured interview guide specific to that study sub-population.

Focus group discussions with community members
We conducted eight FGDs with community members to elicit views on masculinity and the engagement of men in programs to end VAWG and promote women's rights. Four FGDs were conducted with a total of 35 men and were led by two male field researchers while another four FGDs, led by female field researchers were conducted with a total of 45 women. One field researcher acted as the moderator and the other as the note-taker.

Before each group discussion, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to be part of the discussion by signing an informed consent form. The informed consent was read to them and for some translated into Arabic Juba and respondents were given time to ask questions. Each group discussion lasted almost 3-hours. The discussions were held at locations that were convenient to most members of each group and were audio-recorded with the consent of participants.

In-depth interviews with community leaders

In-depth interviews (IDIs) with community leaders were conducted face-to-face. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. IDIs were conducted in Juba Arabic and English depending on the preference of the participant. Each IDI lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and took place at locations that were convenient for the participants. The interviews were also audio-recorded with the consent of participants. Based on the South Sudan context, most community leaders were men and, therefore, only one woman out of nine community leaders was interviewed.

Key Informant Interviews with policymakers and program implementers

Most KIIs were conducted face-to-face, except for one interview that was conducted over the phone at the informant's request. Key informant interviews with policymakers and program implementers sought to understand best practices and challenges in harnessing positive masculinities and engaging men in programs to eliminate VAWG and promote the rights of women. The KII lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted in English or Juba Arabic depending on the preference of participants and they were also audio-recorded with the consent of participants.

In-depth interviews with beneficiaries

All IDIs with program beneficiaries were conducted face-to-face. The interviews explored the extent to which programs that promote positive masculinities and male engagement in ending VAWG and promoting women's rights contribute to improved outcomes for women and girls. Each beneficiary targeted for the interview was asked to indicate their willingness to participate in the research by signing the informed consent document.

Participants were asked to read or the field interviewer read the informed consent document before confirming that they understood the nature of their involvement in the research and signing the consent document. The IDIs with beneficiaries lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted in English and Juba Arabic depending on the preference of participants. The interviews were also audio-recorded with the consent of participants. Interviews took place at locations that were convenient for the participants.

Data Processing

Recorded data were translated and transcribed verbatim from Juba Arabic to English by bilingual translators. Transcribed data were cleaned and organized in preparation for coding using Nvivo version 14. Study investigators reviewed a few transcripts to identify and develop a code book which was used to code all the transcripts. New codes that emerged during coding were used to update the initial code book. Two investigators coded the transcripts and disagreements on the categorization of themes were resolved through discussions among all investigators. The study investigators then discussed the structure and undertook the writing of the study report. The audio tapes were erased once the study report was finalized.

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data in line with the study objectives. This involved reflexive coding, developing a list of emerging themes, categorizing the themes within a hierarchical framework of main and sub-themes, looking for patterns and associations between the themes, and comparing and contrasting within and between the different groups of participants.

STUDY FINDINGS

This section presents the study findings. It is organized into broader sections based on main themes and sub-themes in line with the study objectives.

Conceptions of Masculinity

The essence of masculinity emerged as a nuanced tapestry woven with social, cultural, and ethical threads in Munuki and Luri Payams. Participants recounted a complex understanding of manliness deeply rooted in tradition yet adapting to contemporary shifts. Traditional masculinity attributes such as leadership and provision coexist with evolving perspectives on gender equality and emotional intelligence. The exploration reveals a multifaceted male identity shaped by diverse roles, responsibilities, and attributes. This dynamic conception of masculinity reflects the intricate interplay between cultural heritage and the evolving dynamics of modern society, offering a unique glimpse into the participants' perspectives. Participants' perspectives on key masculinity attributes are discussed below:

Benevolent patriarch and protector

According to respondents, a man is perceived as the head of the family, responsible for providing and protecting his household, which is important in maintaining the family's stability and safety.

> *"…As the primary provider, the man's role is marked by unwavering dedication to provide for his wife, children, and other household members, including parents. His duties include ensuring the availability of basic needs like food, clothing, education, and other essentials."* **(IDI, respondent 3, male, community leader, age 59, Luri Payam)**

This role extends beyond just supplying food, clothing, and shelter, to comprehensive management of household affairs. The ability to provide for one's family is a crucial aspect of being a man. As Respondent 5 puts it:

> *"A man in the household should be able to provide for his children, you can be called only a man if you can provide for your children and your wife because this is your responsibility at home."* **(FGD 2, respondent 5, male, community member, Luri Payam)**

These statements highlight the societal expectation for men to be the primary providers for their families. Furthermore, the role of a protector significantly expands the scope of a man's caregiving duties. Men are expected to do more than just provide financial and physical support; they are also regarded as defenders of their families and communities, a role that highlights their dedication to the welfare and security of their loved ones. For example, one participant illustrates this point by stating that:

"In my community (Nuer) tribe, we are a Nilotic and pastoralist society where a man has to be brave to protect the land, cattle, women, property and their dignity against enemies" **(IDI, respondent 1; male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 37, Luri Payam)**

Discussions in both male and female focus groups revealed a consensus that a "real" man is seen as a provider, and protector who earnestly undertakes these responsibilities, ensuring the well-being of children and partners and fostering a sense of care and responsibility within the home. Women, in particular, emphasized the necessity of financial support as captured by one respondent:

"Being a man means being the breadwinner and taking charge of your household...working day and night to make sure that you provide for your family, be able to take your children to school and to provide for all their needs." **(FGD 2, male, respondent 1, community member, Luri Payam)**

Equally, failing to fulfill these roles often results in being labeled a "weak man". A "weak man" is often characterized by laziness, inability to fulfill family and community roles, and lack of sexual prowess. For instance, one of the respondents described a weak man as

"sexually poor and local," unable to understand or please his partner, and unwilling to seek improvement." **(FGD 1, Respondent 6, male, community member, Luri Payam)**

Participants associated weakness with a lack of hard work and men's inability to provide for their families.

Leadership

Leadership stood out as a vital theme in the participants' understanding of masculinity. The respondents emphasized that one way to express manliness is through leadership, ethical behavior, and observing societal values. A man is seen as a pillar of strength not only within the household but also within the larger community, with a clear mandate to lead by example and instill a sense of moral direction. The nurturing role of men as mentors is also highlighted in the community narrative. One male respondent from Luri Payam articulated this perspective:

"A strong man is someone that can be recommended by the community members that, based on how you manage your family, the people can, can see that yes you are someone who can manage the community affairs, then if there is any position of leadership the people will all agree that you can take that post." **(FGD 2, respondent 2, male, community member, Luri Payam)**

This quote underscores the community's expectation that a man's ability to manage his household is directly linked to his capacity to handle broader community responsibilities. It highlights the belief that effective family leadership serves as a proving ground for broader community leadership roles. In contrast, the study also reveals entrenched gender norms that limit women's participation in leadership. One participant noted:

> *"Women are not allowed by norms to participate or have a decision on community leadership like chiefdom."* **(FGD 1, respondent 6, male, community member, Luri Payam)**

This statement points to the exclusionary practices that prevent women from accessing leadership positions, reflecting the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that define leadership as an inherently male domain. This exclusion not only perpetuates gender inequality but also reinforces the notion that leadership and authority are exclusively male traits.

Embrace and participate in cultural practices

Men's participation in cultural rites and ceremonies is not a passive engagement but rather a conscious embodiment of the community's values. A participant stated that:

> *"A real man must comply with cultural values and be available to support when there is a need for your help…"* **(IDI, male, community leader, age 59, Luri Payam)**

This quote highlights the expectation for men to actively uphold and nurture beneficial cultural practices and to provide support when community values are challenged. The interplay between masculinity and culture also demands that men engage in critical self-reflection and espouse good character. Men should not only preserve but also critically evaluate cultural norms, steering their communities toward practices that promote health, peace, and gender equality. Men are also seen as cultural educators, tasked with passing on valuable traditions to the next generation while ensuring that these practices evolve with the times.

Community engagement

Community engagement and ethical conduct are central to the conception of manhood within these narratives, with an emphasis on active involvement and moral leadership in the public sphere. Men are expected to be proactive members of their community, engaging in activities that promote peace, culture, and development. One participant noted:

> *"A real man supports peace and culture. Play roles in any community meeting or engagement…"* **(IDI, respondent 8; male, deputy headmaster, age 44, Munuki Payam)**

This quote highlights the expectation for men to be active contributors to the peace and cultural fabric of their communities. This role extends beyond personal interests, focusing on the betterment of society as a whole.

> *"I would say men are the ones that own the power, most powers in the community. Why would I say that, that comes from the society orientation? You know, society orients men to be the ones taking care of the entire family or entire community in terms of even, a case when there is a threat, it is a man that is always been asked to respond."* **(KII, female, EMAP facilitator, age 28, Luri Payam)**

Moreover, community service is seen as a tangible expression of masculinity, where involvement in communal projects is a direct reflection of one's commitment to the community's welfare. Men are seen as instrumental in the creation of vital community infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, which are cornerstones of societal progress.

Embodies good moral conduct

Personal attributes and behavior are at the core of societal expectations of men, linking ideas of strength, emotional management, and ethical conduct. A man's identity is largely shaped by these characteristics, which dictate not only his standing in the family but also his reputation and role in the broader community. Maturity and emotional intelligence are also highly valued. Men are tasked with the responsibility of making sensible decisions that reflect wisdom and insight. They are seen as the moral compass of their households, steering their families with integrity. According to one respondent:

> *"You must represent your family, protect them and take their responsibilities in good manners according to social values and setting…"* **(IDI, respondent 1; male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 37, Luri Payam)**

This quote indicates the expectation for men to uphold and embody societal values and ethics. Self-control and the ability to refrain from negative behaviors such as violence, excessive drinking, or other forms of misconduct are considered essential for maintaining social respectability. The community looks unfavorably upon those who indulge in such behaviors, as they contradict the expected conduct of a responsible man.

> *"In our culture, when people say that you are not a real man, it means they saw bad things in you, for example, you might be a drunkard, smoker, thief, adulterer, and many others. So, in order to be indebted, you must avoid the negative attitudes and act positively.."* **(IDI, female, head of CBO, age 47, Munuki Payam)**

Moreover, personal development and self-improvement are encouraged, with a focus on continual growth and maintaining a good public image. Men are expected to be role models not only within their families but also within the wider community, embodying values that others, especially younger generations, can aspire to.

Gender equality

The evolving discourse on masculinity includes a critical examination and transformation of gender roles within the household and community. Progressive ideals encourage a move away from rigid, traditional gender constructs towards a more fair and equitable distribution of roles and responsibilities. Men are increasingly seen as partners rather than sole providers or authoritarian figures within the family structure. They are taking on roles traditionally assigned to women, such as child-rearing and domestic tasks, recognizing that these responsibilities do not diminish their masculinity but rather enhance it. Family involvement is another significant aspect. Men's positive roles in the family include being present for their wives, especially during pregnancy, mentoring wives and children, and participating in roles like cooking and household chores. Participants see men challenging toxic cultural norms as a positive expression of masculinity. Speaking up for women's and girls' rights and being agents of change in the community are highly valued. As one respondent put it:

> *"We used to have... [toxic cultures] ... but now we are in a world whereby everyone is a breadwinner... it requires men to also challenge the cultures…"* **(IDI, male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 27, Munuki Payam)**

This shift is not just about altering domestic roles but also about fostering an environment where women's rights and contributions are actively acknowledged and valued. Men are encouraged to view their wives as equals, celebrating their achievements and supporting their ambitions. Respect and integrity in the treatment of all genders are increasingly considered essential traits of a modern man. The ideal man now respects women as equals and champions their rights. This perspective is crucial in addressing systemic gender imbalances and in creating a society that values the contributions of all its members equally.

Negative masculinity

In Munuki and Luri Payams, discussions among men and women highlighted various manifestations of negative masculinity, profoundly impacting the community's social fabric. In this section, we discuss the various ways in which negative masculinity manifests in the community.

Violence

Violence, including domestic violence and community conflicts, is a prevalent expression of negative masculinity. Men often resort to violence to assert their dominance and control, disrupting family environments and perpetuating a cycle of aggression. Efforts to promote conflict resolution and respect for others are essential for breaking this cycle and fostering a safer community. The women's focus group discussions highlighted how domestic violence and the oppression of wives are seen as negative masculinity, emphasizing the need for a shift towards more respectful expressions of masculinity. One respondent mentioned that:

> *"I personally…I will define a weak man as a man who cannot ..a weak man is a man who does not control his anger in terms of ahh… GBV. A man who normally beats up his wife… is a weak man to me personally…"* **(IDI, female, EMAP program beneficiary, age 29, Munuki Payam),**

This quote indicates that violence is seen as a negative manifestation of masculinity by study participants in South Sudan. Both men's and women's focus group discussions acknowledged that challenging a man's sexual prowess or his ability to provide can trigger negative and violent responses. This is attributed to societal pressures and deeply ingrained beliefs that masculinity should not be questioned. Such reactions not only cause immediate harm but also necessitate a broader societal effort to redefine masculinity in healthier, non-aggressive terms.

Abuse substances

Substance abuse, particularly alcohol and drugs, is erroneously perceived as a demonstration of manliness. This leads to an escalation of domestic violence and aggressive behavior, especially when men feel their masculinity is threatened. A respondent noted:

"A weak man goes out, drinks, and comes back to quarrel with his wife, beats the children, and doesn't respect his wife. Anyone he meets on the way he starts looking for problems/violence; he causes problems either outside or in the household, this is the kind of man who is not good and does not have respect." **(FGD 1, female, respondent 9, community member, Munuki Payam)**

Abuse of Power

In both Payams, the abuse of power by men in leadership roles is a critical concern. Men in leadership roles often engage in harassment, intimidation, and the establishment of oppressive social hierarchies, embodying negative masculinity and fostering division and conflict. This creates a toxic social environment marked by oppression and disparities. This misuse of power fosters division and conflict, contributing to a toxic social environment. Addressing these abuses is essential for creating a more equitable and just community where power is used responsibly and for the common good. A respondent highlighted:

"If you used your power of being a man to harass or intimidate other people. For example. There are those rich people in the community who are believed to be masculine enough through their hard work and connections to get resources. In most cases, one may become aggressive and want to control the community or the whole extended family. When he is opposed or rejected by his colleagues or members, he can use his wealth to divide people and cause conflict." **(FGD 1, respondent 2; male, community member, Luri Payam)**

Criminality and exploitation represent another concerning facet of negative masculinity. This includes engaging in criminal activities like theft and land grabbing, often under the guise of pursuing education and job opportunities. Such behaviors pervert the intended purposes of personal and societal advancement, transforming them into means of oppression and exploitation of the less privileged. For example, a respondent recounted that:

"it is when a man uses his power to steal, grab, or rob people's belongings knowing that he can beat someone if he is caught. Like here in South Sudan, land grabbing is common by the people who are believed to be masculine". **(FGD 1, respondent 8, male, community member, Luri Payam).**

In sum, these discussions in Munuki Payam reveal a pressing need to confront and rectify these detrimental expressions of masculinity, advocating for positive change that benefits the entire community.

Fail to fulfill family obligations

Failing to fulfill family obligations is another manifestation of negative masculinity. Men who subscribe to harmful ideals often neglect their responsibilities towards their families, prioritizing their own needs and desires over those of their loved ones. This neglect leads to strained family relationships and contributes to the overall dysfunction of the household. Encouraging men to take an active and responsible role in their families is essential for building stronger, more supportive family units. One participant stated:

> *"All right a weak man is not responsible and lacks responsibility. I can describe him as a lazy man who just wants to sleep in the house and doesn't want to move or do any thing".* **(IDI, female, head of CBO, age 47, Munuki Payam)**

Does not show his emotions

Both men and women in the community acknowledged that emotional insecurity needs to be addressed to foster healthier expressions of masculinity and improve overall well-being. One participant highlighted the internal struggle by stating,

> *"If you cry you bring shame to your relatives and you will be considered weak. Those individuals who bear the pain are honored and respected by their families."* **(IDI, male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 37, Luri Payam)**

Emotional insecurity is a significant aspect of negative masculinity. Men often feel pressured to suppress their emotions to maintain an image of strength and control. This suppression leads to emotional turmoil and can manifest in harmful behaviors such as aggression and violence.

Linkages between negative masculinities and violence against women and girls

The link between negative masculinities and violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a critical issue rooted in various socio-cultural factors. Patriarchal beliefs, a core component of this, restrict women's autonomy and decision-making, creating an environment conducive for VAWG to thrive. Certain expectations associated with male gender identity, emphasizing control and discipline, can normalize violence as a method of asserting authority. This normalization is reinforced within families, where sons internalize negative masculinity by observing parental behavior, particularly that of fathers. Gendered roles, particularly the man's role as the head of the household, influence conflict resolution within families and can lead to violence normalization. There are harmful beliefs that justify violence for actions deemed as disobedience by women, such as neglecting children, going out without permission, or infidelity. Restrictions on women's freedom and rights contribute to power imbalances and violence. Respondent 20 said,

> *"You know a woman is not supposed to be superior to you, a woman is supposed to cook, and that cooking is, it has to be, whether there is money or there is no money a woman must provide a meal, you have to cook, okay? So, that is where a man even if he provides or he doesn't provide comes home demanding food, if there is no food, a woman is beaten, okay?"* **(IDI, female, EMAP program beneficiary, age 36, Munuki Payam)**

Additionally, the perception of masculine superiority diminishes respect for women, especially in professional settings, fostering a context where VAWG can occur. The women's group discussion in Munuki Payam highlighted that such beliefs even influence law enforcement's response to domestic violence. A KII within the police talked about the interplay between the social acceptance of VAWGs and the police units, He said:

> *"There is so much violence against women and girls but are not allowed socially to be reported to police or any government institutions because they think reporting the case may lower their dignity and value"* **(KII, respondent 2, male, retired police officer, age 72, Luri Payam)**

This belief system is encapsulated in statements from the women's focus group discussion, noting that superiority ideologies have created this culture of VAWG acceptance.

> *"…Men only ahead… boys more important than girls… men as the head of the family…"* **(FGD 2, female, respondent 5, community member, Luri Payam)**

Facilitators for harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG

The study reveals insightful approaches to harnessing positive positive masculinities to end VAWG. We discuss in details these approaches in this section.

Funding gender transformative programs targeting men and boys

Participants emphasized the need for funding gender transformative programs targeting men and boys. By allocating resources, these programs can create impactful initiatives that foster positive masculinity and gender equality. Financial support ensures the sustainability and effectiveness of these programs, making a significant difference in the lives of men and boys. One participant stated:

> *"Yah, we have got institutions that help communities into this. For example, if I want to help my community and I want them to learn more, I have to come up with programs and those programs have to, if I don't have ways of ah funding them, will be looking for institutions that can help communities to do that…"* **(IDI, community leader, male, church leader, age 51, Luri Payam)**

The statement above underscores the crucial need for mobilizing resources to support positive masculinity initiatives in South Sudan. Adequate funding is essential for reaching a broad audience and effectively implementing programs that promote gender equality and non-violence among men and boys. Without sufficient financial support, these transformative activities cannot achieve their full potential, leaving communities without the necessary tools and knowledge to foster positive masculinity and drive meaningful change.

Leveraging community activities like sports and vocational training

Sports and vocational training were highlighted as effective ways to engage men and boys in the community. These activities provide a platform for learning and promoting positive masculinity. By integrating gender equality messages into sports and vocational programs in the communities, we can reach a wider audience and foster inclusive attitudes. Respondent 5 supported this:

> *"I think men and boys, they should be encouraged through maybe supportive programs like football clubs, ok something that makes them busy, something that keeps them within the community".* **(FGD 2, female, respondent 5, community member, Luri Payam)**

Holding dialogues, workshops, and seminars

Participants suggested that dialogues, workshops, and seminars are crucial in educating men and boys about gender equality and the harms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). These educational forums create safe spaces for open discussions and reflections, helping to shift harmful gender norms and promote respectful behaviors. According to Respondent 1:

"humanitarians need to focus training and workshops of participants, they should mobilize more participants in areas of their operations and build their capacity so they will be able to extend their knowledge to their families." **(FGD 1, male, community member, Luri Payam)**

Educational reform is essential for lasting change. Standardized programs that educate young men and boys about gender-based violence and equality could help to close knowledge gaps. Participants emphasized the importance of raising awareness in schools, churches, mosques, and universities. Educational institutions and religious centers are influential spaces where gender equality and non-violence messages can be effectively communicated. This approach would ensure that young men and boys learn about positive masculinity from an early age, fostering a generation that values respect and equality. For example, one participant stated that:

"we need to engage men in our community and schools, public debates about positive masculinity or human rights, training and workshops so that we understand the roles and responsibilities of positive masculinity in our household and community as a whole." **(FGD 1, male, respondent 3, Munuki payam).**

Engaging at the community level

Engaging at the community level was seen as essential for fostering positive masculinities. Grassroots initiatives, including awareness campaigns and education sessions, could play a pivotal role in reshaping perceptions of masculinity and challenging traditional gender roles. Community engagement could ensure that messages reach a broad audience and create lasting change. Respondent 8, a community leader, emphasized this:

"we need awareness whether being public awareness or community awareness or house to house awareness. Because by doing this, I think this will increase the… the…the understanding." **(IDI, community leader, male deputy headmaster, age 44, Munuki Payam).**

Locally initiated grassroots awareness campaigns are pivotal in fostering dialogue and education within communities. These campaigns can reshape prevailing perceptions of masculinity and challenge traditional gender roles. Participants underscored the potential of civic education in ending VAWG, particularly by targeting young men through community meetings, training workshops, and household sessions. Participants raised concerns on issues of reach, especially in the rural settings as indicated by a Male EMAP Program Beneficiary age 30, Munuki Payam:

"Just the information is not 100% reaching the grassroots, although we always keep talking about these (positive masculinity) on radios, the coverage of this information is not 100% covering the country? That is the question, if it is covered yes, what is the feedback but I believe it's not covering yeah."

Another participant added:

> *"Until now, patriarchal beliefs are still dominant and to change this system, it needs a serious awareness up-to grassroots level on positive masculinity and equality."* **(IDI, respondent 2, male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 36, Luri Payam)**

Having men as role models and gender champions

Developing male role models and gender champions was identified as a key strategy. Training men to advocate for positive masculinity and gender equality can have a ripple effect in communities. These champions serve as examples, demonstrating the benefits of gender equality and respectful behaviors, and inspiring others. A respondent reflected on the previous program:

> *"and then men need to be role models, I know of men who inspire me a lot how do a lot of things haa masculine yeah but then ha they have embraced positive masculinity. And then I think I don't know whether you have witnessed during these projects of positive masculinity men4women, the cooking challenge, and the husband schools, the EMAP training, where men get involved in most of the house activity, house chores and then that is how we can build up the community that we want."* **(IDI, respondent 12, female, EMAP program beneficiary, age 20, Munuki Payam).**

Leveraging the influence of traditional and religious leaders

Leveraging the influence of traditional and religious leaders is a critical approach to harnessing positive masculinity. These leaders can challenge harmful practices and actively promote gender equality. Their endorsement legitimizes evolving norms and propels cultural shifts toward embracing attitudes that reject violence and prioritize gender equality. One respondent emphasized the significant role of these leaders:

> *"Hmm, the traditional leaders or the religious leaders have got a big responsibility in changing our society. And of course, … we need to ensure that we always need to enhance education on this kind of issue among the communities. If you are a church leader, and then you have a program or a family life discussion, and family life discussion always talks about how we need to run our families, how we need to govern our families, how we need to ensure there's love at home, how we need to have cooperation in the family."* **(IDI, community leader, male, church leader, age 51, Luri Payam).**

Another respondent highlighted the role of traditional leaders:

> *"We traditional leaders, especially our chiefs, have a role to advise the men on their roles and duties in their household and community as a whole. We also take responsibility as elders to resolve any conflicts and disputes of family mismanagement as a result of negative masculinity or inequality caused and make sure to provide a binding resolution to the conflict."* **(IDI, male, community leader, age 59, Luri Payam).**

These statements underscore the vital contribution of traditional and religious leaders in promoting positive masculinity. By advocating for gender equality and challenging harmful practices, these leaders can significantly influence societal norms and foster a culture that rejects violence and embraces equality.

Advocate for policy development and legal framework strengthening

Advocating for policy development and legal implementation is crucial for harnessing positive masculinity and ensuring gender equality. Strengthening legal frameworks to protect women's and girls' rights is essential for creating an environment where positive masculinity can thrive. A robust legal framework aligns societal expectations with principles of respect and equality, setting the foundation for a more equitable society. A participant emphasized the role of government in this process:

> *"Well, I feel like the government does little about it… Like, the government needs to also spearhead all these and when I talk about the government, I don't look at the government as a whole, I look at the ministry of gender, you understand? It should spearhead almost all this domestic violence, you understand?"* **(IDI, respondent 6, male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 25, Luri Payam).**

This statement underscores the importance of not only creating supportive legal frameworks but also ensuring their effective implementation. Advocating for the enforcement of existing laws and the development of new policies is essential for reducing gender-based violence and promoting positive masculinity in South Sudan. By addressing the willpower of individuals and ensuring the proper application of laws, significant strides can be made towards a more just and equitable society.

Co-creation of positive masculinity interventions with men and boys

Including men and boys in planning and executing gender-based violence interventions is crucial. Engaging them from the outset ensures that interventions are well-informed and more likely to be successful. Early education on these topics helps shape more equitable attitudes, instilling values of respect and equality from childhood. One respondent said*:*

> *"Yes what can be done is to increase the programs, donors should be convinced in order to involve men and boys in the gender-based violence activities. Since they are the men that are perpetrators of violence it is good that they are engaged in all forms. Now there are only a few men that are involved and that have changed their thinking so, get more money and make more programs we, we have to make mass awareness."* **(KII, respondent 5, male Payam Administrator, age 52 years, Luri Payam).**

Barriers to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG

Here we present the barriers hindering the engagement of men in positive masculinity programs to foster equitable gender norms and end violence against women and girls. Participants identified several challenges that impede the success of these programs. These barriers include deeply entrenched gender norms, skepticism about gender equality programs, the perception that gender equality is a foreign concept, resistance and backlash to change, inadequate funding, and men's busy schedules. We expound on each of these barriers as follows:

Deeply entrenched gender norms

Cultural norms and perceptions around gender relations deeply influence responses to VAWG. These norms, steeped in tradition and taboos, significantly limit men's participation in positive masculinity programs. One respondent explained thus,

> *"traditional norms discouraged men's involvement in women programs in a sense that other men will get connected in one way or another by dating women that are legally married to others… "* **(KII, respondent 1, male, police officer, age 40, Luri Payam).**

Such societal constructs are further cemented by gender role expectations that categorically deter men from engaging in what is perceived as feminine activities, thereby entrenching gender divisions and inhibiting male support in areas critical to women's empowerment and safety.

Skepticism about gender equality programs

Efforts to promote gender equality face significant skepticism within communities. Some individuals view these programs with suspicion or perceive them as unnecessary. One respondent noted:

> *"Most of these programs are considered to be against the norms, and most people don't agree with them but because it is international law and supported by government, no person can tamper with it or question it. So, most people choose to distance themselves from the activities or programs about GBV,"* **(IDI, respondent 3; male community leader, age 59, Luri Payam).**

This quote reflects a broader reluctance to change the status quo. This skepticism is often tied to deep-seated beliefs about gender roles and the perceived implications of changing these roles.

The perception that gender equality is a foreign concept fuels resistance and backlash

Some community members view gender equality as a foreign concept imposed by external entities. This perception creates resistance to adopting new practices and ideas. As one respondent observed:

> *"When the issue of positive masculinity landed mmmm… I think people perceived it and internalized or synthesized it in different dynamics mmm… others ahh… said this is a western culture, that people are trying to impose mmm.. and societies that have their well-defined cultures mmmm… and that alone ahh… rise what we call common resistance mmm."* **(IDI, respondent 16; male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 27, Munuki Payam)**

This view can hinder the acceptance and integration of gender equality initiatives, making it challenging to engage men in programs aimed at promoting positive masculinity. There is marked resistance to change within these cultural frameworks. Efforts to promote family planning and challenge rigid gender roles that contribute to ending GBV face significant opposition. Initiatives that seek to foster gender equality are often met with hostility. This resistance not only impedes progress but can also result in a backlash against those advocating for change. One key informant noted:

> *" the men may take it in a way that we are advocating for the women to overthrow them which is not the case but we are trying to bridge the two sides."* **(KII, respondent 7; male 39, Payam Coordinator)**

Inadequate funding

Efforts to end VAWGs through positive masculinity programs are severely hampered by a lack of funds and resources. The lack of budget allocations for crucial police training on GBV represents a significant shortfall in the system. One respondent highlighted:

> *"Well, let me take an example for our police unit. There is no budget approved to train the police nationwide on gender crimes (GVB) and distribute them to all the police stations across the country…"* **(KII, respondent 2; male, retired police officer, age 72, Luri Payam)**

This lack of investment in law enforcement training is indicative of a broader trend of inadequate support for initiatives that could lead to substantial progress in the fight against GBV. Similarly, insufficient funding for advocacy and programs aimed at fostering positive masculinity severely limits the potential for cultural and behavioral change among men.

Men's busy schedules

Men's busy schedules present another barrier to their involvement in positive masculinity programs. Many men have demanding work schedules and responsibilities that leave little time for participation in these initiatives. One respondent remarked,

> *"As I said, they are not able to find more men and women since people are all busy with their livelihoods..."* **(IDI, respondent 3, male, community leader, age 59, Luri Payam)**

Another added,

> *"Most of these training and workshops are done during my hustling hours and so, I couldn't attend them fully as I want"*. **(IDI, respondent 5; male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 39, Luri Payam)**

The time constraint can limit the reach and effectiveness of programs designed to engage men in efforts to combat GBV and promote gender equality.

A Case Study of the Engaging Men through Accountable Practices

In this section, we present a case study of a positive masculinity program engaging men and boys to transform gender attitudes and end violence against women and girls. We chose to evaluate the Engaging Men through Accountable Practices (EMAP) program. The EMAP (Engaging Men on Accountable Practices) program, developed by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), is designed to engage men in promoting gender equality and reducing violence against women and girls (VAWG). Although it was initially created for refugee settings, it has successfully been integrated into community settings in South Sudan. Community programs and education form the bedrock of sustainable change in the fight against VAWGs. Educational initiatives such as Engaging Men through Accountable Practices (EMAP) play a crucial role in this arena. This program is designed to enlighten men about the importance of violence prevention and the principles of gender equality.

Training and recruitment

Men4Women began by recruiting young people eager to become facilitators. After advertising the opportunity, they received many applications and selected thirty individuals—twenty-four males and six females. The facilitators underwent a rigorous five-day training program. This training covered the facilitation guide and specific topics related to behavior change. Since the EMAP model is in English, it was essential for facilitators to be literate, but translating materials into local languages was also encouraged to ensure wider understanding.
One participant explained,

> *"We advertised for young people who wanted to be facilitators. When they applied, we got up to thirty young people. Now the EMAP model talks about collecting women's voices to inform the discussions of the men, so we had to include female facilitators…"* **(KII, respondent 8, male, Men4Women, age 36, Munuki Payam)**

Program structure

The EMAP program spans sixteen weeks and is divided into two phases. During the first eight weeks, male facilitators integrate women's voices into their sessions, discussing how men's actions impact women and their feelings. The next eight weeks focus on broader behavior change topics. To maintain continuity and effectiveness, the same community members must attend all sixteen sessions. Weekly assessments and a comprehensive impact assessment at the end of the program help measure the facilitators' performance and the program's overall effectiveness.

Community engagement

Facilitators participate in various activities to promote positive masculinity. One such activity is the "Talking Circles," where both men and women gather to discuss topics like menstrual health. Participants speak uninterrupted for a minute each, creating a space for learning and unlearning. Another activity, the *[Rujal Bi arkder]* translated as the 'Men can do it' cooking challenge, involves facilitators in cooking, thus promoting positive masculinity. Facilitators also engage in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SHRH) camps and work with *boda boda* (motorbike) riders to raise awareness about GBV prevention and SHRH services.

Geographical coverage

Currently, the EMAP program is implemented in three states in South Sudan: Central Equatoria (Juba), Western Equatoria (Yambio), and Eastern Equatoria (Torit). Facilitators work within these communities to deliver the core interventions and serve as role models, promoting positive changes in gender norms. The overall aim of this program is to foster gender equality through positive masculinity and end VAWG by engaging men as active allies in this critical mission.

Effects of engaging men through accountable practices intervention

The EMAP intervention has a profound impact, ushering in heightened awareness, altered perceptions, and transformative behavioral shifts related to masculinity according to the program beneficiaries. The discernible impact of this intervention is evident in the shared experiences and testimonies of participants actively engaged in the programs. The transformative outcomes are encapsulated in three distinct dimensions:

1. Increased awareness of GBV and SRH issues

The EMAP intervention successfully elevated awareness among beneficiaries, leading to a profound shift in understanding the complexities and consequences of GBV. Participants who were once oblivious to the various forms and degrees of GBV emerged as informed advocates. A participant shared his transformative experience, stating:

> *"I have learned a lot about the concept of gender-based violence. I know the violence against all genders and what should be done to stop them. Now, I am a disciplined and informed man. I know my roles as a man in my household and the community."* **(IDI, male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 39, Luri Payam)**.

This testimonial reflects a newfound awareness and commitment to combating GBV among program participants. Another program beneficiary talked about the importance of family planning in fostering harmony and promoting a healthy family as indicated below:

"Yeah, it has changed, you know it has changed because the reason as to why it has changed you know our fellow men come to understand that when you have a family planning ah you have a healthy family, you see that, so they come to understand how this family planning helps them a lot? Like, the normal way, women used to come alone to have this family planning, so when they took family planning, they started hiding it, they would not tell their husbands yes, "I have taken family planning and what" unless a man realized, but currently according to my education that I educate women and talk to them telling them you know, don't fear, if they come don't fear just go home and share with your husband, tell him ABCD and what if your husband does not understand, come with him okay, to the facility, I will be able to talk to your man and then make him understand. So, our men currently, have come to understand how family planning benefits them a lot, yah." **(IDI, male EMAP program beneficiary, age 38, Luri Payam)**

2. Change in gendered perceptions

The EMAP program facilitated a notable change in perceptions as participants transitioned from entrenched gender biases to a more enlightened view. Beneficiaries who previously adhered to traditional notions of male dominance underwent a paradigm shift towards recognizing VAWGs and embracing equality and respect. A beneficiary expressed this shift, saying,

"I've realized it is never a woman's fault when you abuse the woman, it's me because I can choose not to touch her if I don't want to touch her. If I don't want to beat a woman, I will choose not to beat a woman, not because I am a man that I have to beat, no." **(IDI, respondent 3, male, program beneficiary, age 30, Luri Payam)**

This change signifies a departure from rigid gender norms and a willingness to adopt more inclusive and egalitarian perspectives. Another beneficiary noted that:

"Having participated in several events for human rights has changed my mind from a belief that men are superior and more powerful than women. I have come to learn that all genders are equal and should play the same roles in their daily lives." **(IDI, respondent 5, male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 25, Luri Payam)**

3. Changes in gender attitudes and behaviors

The EMAP intervention yielded tangible behavioral changes, with men actively challenging and transforming their once-harmful behaviors. Beneficiaries acknowledged their past misconceptions and embraced new attitudes aligned with non-violence and equality. One beneficiary admitted,

"mm… the program is even adding just a value but for the case of ahh.. what we are doing, I will say it has changed my approach to solving problems mmmm… changed my working relation with fellow females like as I speak, I am sharing an office with a lady. We interact freely, she can share what goes wrong with her mmm… freely and I do respect that…" **(IDI, respondent 16, male, EMAP program beneficiary, age 27, Munuki Payam)**

This narrative exemplifies the program's success in fostering positive behavioral changes, promoting healthier relationships, and dismantling harmful masculine norms. Many program beneficiaries demonstrated a commendable commitment to equality and non-violence, showcasing a significant departure from toxic masculinity norms. A participant shared a personal revelation, stating:

> *"I have become a loving partner and father. I have learned enough on some cases I passed through as program manager."* **(IDI, respondent 1, male, program beneficiary, age 37, Luri Payam)**

One illustrative example of the program's success is a man known for his rigid stance on gender roles. Following gender sensitivity training, he began actively participating in household chores, a task he previously scoffed at. This tangible behavioral change exemplifies the transformative impact of the EMAP program in promoting nurturing family roles and challenging traditional gender norms. Despite the positive outcomes, some participants faced resistance to change, particularly those deeply entrenched in patriarchal beliefs. A key informant highlighted this challenge, explaining:

> *"...is that the beliefs, the cultural beliefs that exist in different communities where they say a boy is not supposed to go to the kitchen, so when they see a reformed young boy going to the kitchen, they will say no no, that's not your work..."* **(KII, respondent 5, male, administrator, age 52 years, Luri Payam)**

This acknowledgment underscores the persistent challenges in overcoming deeply ingrained negative masculinities, emphasizing the ongoing need for advocacy and education. In summary, these programs have engendered significant positive shifts in the fight against GBV by redefining masculinity in more equitable terms. However, the ongoing challenge lies in converting those who cling to harmful beliefs, underscoring the need for continued advocacy and education. For example, an EMAP facilitator shared that:

> *"um, there are many I would say because I was reading through the impact assessment, we had on the EMAP engagement which we did in Juba, in Munuki, and Juba Na Bari like there were those men because now we interviewed also their women their wives there those men who used not to even to sweep the compound, they now start to sweep the compound..."* **(KII, respondent 8, male, Men4Women, age 36, Munuki Payam)**

DISCUSSION

This study comprehensively explored stakeholders' perspectives on masculinity and its intricate link to violence against women and girls (VAWG) in two Payams in Juba, South Sudan. Specifically, it examined the factors enabling or hindering the promotion of positive masculinities to strategically address VAWG, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In addition, the study aimed to assess a promising intervention to engage men and boys in a positive masculinity initiative dedicated to curbing VAWG. In doing so, the study explored the nuanced dynamics of societal perceptions, cultural norms, and systemic challenges, in order to generate insights to inform targeted strategies for fostering positive masculinities and dismantling the pervasive impact of gender-based violence in the South Sudanese context.

The study found that the ideal type of masculinity in South Sudan is traditional masculinity expressed through benevolent patriarchy, leadership, problem resolution, independence, physical strength, and commitment to community development. Although traditional masculinity is valuable and firmly ingrained, participants observed a shift towards positive masculinity, which manifests via respect, embracing gender equality, emotional intelligence, and non-violence.

Consistent with the literature, participants distinguished between positive and negative masculinities, highlighting that promoting positive masculinity is key to tackling negative masculinity, which is considered to be the root cause of VAWG[22]. Positive masculinity is, however, not a rejection of traditional masculinity but a rejection of negative masculinity expressed through forced early marriage, opposing women's education, emotional insecurity, abusing power, disregarding women's voices, abusing substances, violence, oppressing women, and failing to fulfill family obligations. There was a consensus that manliness is best expressed by fulfilling the traditional masculinity role of provider and protector and failure to live up to this expectation is considered a weakness, a tag men detest.

Confirming existing literature, the study found that efforts to implement gender transformative positive masculinity programs to end VAWG are hindered by entrenched gender norms, skepticism about gender equality programs, the perception that gender equality is a foreign concept, resistance and backlash to change, inadequate funding, and men's busy schedules[23]. While there are promising approaches to reaching men with positive masculinity programs, limited funding makes it challenging for a significant number of enrolling men and boys in these programs.

Due to the limited reach of positive masculinity programs, their impact remains constrained, particularly in rural areas where they are most needed. Previous research shows that programs promoting positive masculinity frequently encounter funding shortages, which restrict their scope and impact[23]. Due to financial constraints, the sustainability of program implementation is compromised. Research indicates that interventions aimed at fostering positive masculinity typically last two years or less, curtailing the extensive exposure of men to these initiatives [24]. The findings underscore the need to adequately fund

gender-transformative positive masculinity programs. Exploring innovative methods for implementing positive masculinity programs cost-effectively and sustainably, without relying solely on donor funding, is of equal importance.

The study uncovers several approaches to successfully harnessing positive masculinity to end VAWG. Stakeholders advocated for a multi-faceted approach involving education, community dialogue, and positive gender role models to dismantle deep-seated norms. These approaches include: funding gender transformative programs targeting men and boys, leveraging activities such as sports and vocational training in the community to reach men and boys, holding dialogues, workshops, and seminars to educate men and boys, offering financial incentives, engaging at the community level, raising awareness in schools, churches, mosques, universities and having men as role models and gender champions in positive masculinity programs. Some of these approaches, especially the use of male champions and reaching men through sporting activities, are currently being used to reach men in African countries like Botswana[25].

In our study, there was a strong emphasis on nesting positive masculinity programs in livelihood interventions to encourage men's participation. A study in South Africa reported that working with men on their livelihoods in a practical way increased engagement in positive masculinity interventions[26]. The study emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive strategies, acknowledging the complex interplay of cultural dynamics in navigating South Sudan's context.

We evaluated one promising positive masculinity intervention known as the Engaging Men through Accountable Practices intervention. We found that the intervention altered perspectives, with beneficiaries moving from entrenched gender biases to more progressive viewpoints. Beneficiaries who previously held to traditional conceptions of male dominance experienced a paradigm shift toward understanding and accepting equality and respect. The finding further adds to the body of literature demonstrating approaches to changing inequitable gender norms[26]. Although beneficiaries argued that the intervention helped them confront and change their gender inequitable beliefs, there is a need for a more robust evaluation of the program because qualitative evaluation design is less robust compared to a randomized control trial.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the role of positive masculinities and male engagement in the elimination of violence against women and girls in South Sudan drawing data from policymakers, community leaders, program beneficiaries, and community members related to their perspectives on masculinity and its link to VAWG, and facilitators of and barriers to harnessing positive masculinities to end VAWG. The study findings are illuminating, highlighting the co-existence of traditional and positive masculinities and a rejection of negative masculinity. The findings illustrate that masculinity demonstrated through benevolent patriarchy, protection, physical strength, leadership, and contribution to community development is the ideal expression of masculinity in South Sudan.

While traditional masculinity is ingrained, there is a notable shift, especially among well-educated urban South Sudanese, towards positive masculinity, which is shown through embracing gender equality, emotional intelligence, and non-violence. The root cause of VAWG is toxic masculinity, which is more prevalent in rural areas than urban areas and endorses early marriage, opposes women's education, instills emotional insecurity, abuses power, ignores the voices of women, abuses substances, uses violence, oppresses women, and neglects family responsibilities. The findings present a roadmap for future initiatives and underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, inclusive, and sustainable approaches to harness positive masculinity to tackle the scourge of VAWG in South Sudan. The voices of policymakers, community leaders, program beneficiaries, and community members are clear: to end VAWG, there must be a concerted effort to reshape societal norms and promote a culture where positive masculinity thrives and gender equality is the standard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations came from study participants and stakeholders engaged during the study validation workshop.

(i) Policies and Strategies:

1. Develop a national policy, action plan, and structures for advancing positive masculinities: In response to the study findings, the Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare (MOGCSW) should formulate a comprehensive national policy. This policy must include well-defined action plans with specific steps and timelines for effective implementation. Simultaneously, the establishment of dedicated structures or task forces is imperative to oversee and coordinate multifaceted initiatives outlined in the policy, ensuring a streamlined and impactful approach to fostering positive masculinity.

2. Design and implement a communication strategy for raising awareness about positive masculinities: Recognizing communication's transformative power, MOGCSW should collaborate with experts and organizations to craft a targeted strategy. This strategy, leveraging diverse channels like media, community outreach programs, and educational institutions, should aim to disseminate information and stimulate crucial discussions. An essential aspect should involve incorporating culturally sensitive messaging for a nuanced understanding of positive masculinity among diverse audiences.

3. Develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for policy implementation: Integral to the proposed policy's success is the establishment of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework. In collaboration with relevant stakeholders, MOGCSW should design a framework with clear key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarks. These metrics serve as essential tools for assessing the policy's effectiveness and program impacts. Regular evaluations, coupled with strategic adjustments based on monitoring results, ensure a dynamic and adaptive approach, promoting continuous improvement.

4. Integrate positive masculinity components into existing policy documents: To solidify commitment, MOGCSW should advocate for integrating specific components into existing policy documents. Amendments to documents such as the Anti-GBV Bill and the Family Bill should explicitly address and enhance women's empowerment through the promotion of positive masculinities. By intertwining these principles into legal frameworks, a comprehensive approach to fostering gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls can be achieved.

(ii) Programmatic Interventions:

1. Engage religious and community leaders: Recognizing the influential role of religious and community leaders, MOGCSW and civil society organizations should facilitate dialogues and workshops to secure their support for positive masculinities. These engagements should encourage integrating positive masculinity principles into religious teachings and community norms, leveraging the leaders' influence for transformative cultural shifts.

2. Invest in educational programs: Education is a potent tool for societal change. MOGCSW and civil society organizations should advocate to the Ministry of Education for the integration of educational programs promoting positive masculinities into school curricula. Additionally, training educators on delivering gender-sensitive content challenging traditional stereotypes will ensure educational institutions become catalysts for positive change.

3. Allocate budgetary resources: For proposed initiatives to materialize, MOGCSW must advocate for dedicated budgetary resources. The financial allocation should support awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and capacity-building programs. By securing these resources,

MOGCSW would ensure tangible implementation of the national policy on positive masculinities, marking a significant step toward fostering a culture of respect, equality, and non-violence in South Sudan.

4. Building strong partnerships with NGOs: To realize a substantial impact, study participants suggested that MOGCSW works closely with local NGOs. These organizations, familiar with the community, can enhance the effectiveness of positive masculinity programs.

5. Empowering communities through leaders and spreading awareness collaboratively: Recognizing the pivotal role of community leaders, MOGCSW should initiate awareness campaigns led by the community using local leaders to share information about positive masculinity. Ensuring the inclusion of local wisdom through key influencers like traditional leaders, Chiefs, religious leaders, and local authorities is vital for enriching positive masculinity programs.

6. Custom-made education programs: Creating education programs that align with local customs is essential. MOGCSW should develop programs matching local practices, making the positive masculinity message more relatable. Close collaboration with the Ministry of Information, NGOs, and others is crucial for creating an acceptable plan for awareness campaigns that leverage the connections of NGOs, community leaders, and youth groups.

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