

What is toxic masculinity, and what measures can be taken to address and challenge its detrimental effects on individuals and society?

In a world where gender roles have long dictated societal expectations, toxic masculinity emerges as a formidable force, perpetuating harmful behaviours and attitudes that undermine individuals and society as a whole. This pervasive phenomenon encompasses a range of negative aspects associated with traditional male gender roles, exerting detrimental effects on mental health, workplace dynamics, LGBTQ+ individuals, and even fatherhood. To confront this deep-rooted issue head-on, it is imperative that we unravel the layers of toxic masculinity and explore effective measures to challenge and address its destructive impact.

This essay delves into the intricate realm of toxic masculinity, shedding light on its origins and illuminating the dire consequences it poses for individuals and society. By examining the realms of mental health, workplace dynamics, LGBTQ+ stigma, and fatherhood, we uncover the insidious ways toxic masculinity perpetuates harm. Moreover, we will explore proactive measures such as awareness campaigns, education, and the promotion of healthy masculinity to challenge and dismantle this toxic framework. Through these efforts, we can forge a society that fosters inclusivity, emotional well-being, and equal opportunities for all, regardless of gender.

Origins

Toxic masculinity is often perpetuated by social norms and expectations that are reinforced by media, popular culture, and other societal institutions. Men are often

encouraged to be tough, aggressive, and emotionally detached, while women are expected to be nurturing, emotional, and submissive. These social norms can lead to the development of toxic behaviours and attitudes that are harmful to both men and women (Settles et al., 2020; Harrington, 2021).

Mental Health

Toxic masculinity has profound and detrimental effects on both individuals and society, particularly in the realm of mental health. Men who conform to traditional masculine gender roles often face immense pressure to suppress their emotions, leading to a range of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and more (Sturkenboom, 2019). Moreover, toxic masculinity contributes to a reluctance among men to seek help or support for their mental health concerns, further exacerbating the problem and potentially leading to more severe conditions (Galvan, N.D.).

The impact of toxic masculinity is evident in the alarming rates of male suicide. Men are four times more likely than women to die by suicide, as reported by the National Institute of Mental Health (Anon, 2018). This disparity can be attributed in part to societal expectations that men should exhibit strength and stoicism, discouraging vulnerability or seeking assistance. The tragic suicide of Robin Williams, a beloved actor and comedian, brought attention to the hidden struggles of men's mental health and the societal pressure to hide emotional vulnerability (Freeman, 2021; Kindon, 2022).

To combat these concerning trends, initiatives like Movember have emerged to address men's mental health. Movember, held annually in November, encourages men to grow mustaches as a means to raise awareness and funds for mental health programs. By

creating safe spaces for open conversations and providing essential resources, Movember challenges the stigma associated with seeking help and encourages men to prioritise their mental well-being (Movember Foundation, N.D.).

Traditional masculinity norms also impede men's mental health by discouraging help-seeking behaviour. Men are less likely than women to pursue mental health treatment, resulting in undiagnosed or untreated conditions such as depression and anxiety. The adherence to these norms often leads men to perceive seeking help as a sign of weakness or failure, increasing the likelihood of self-medication, substance abuse, and even suicide (Chatmon, 2020; NHS, N.D.).

Addressing toxic masculinity and promoting a healthier understanding of masculinity is crucial for the well-being of individuals and society. By encouraging emotional expression, dismantling harmful gender norms, and promoting help-seeking behaviour, we can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that prioritises the mental health of all individuals, regardless of gender.

Workplace Issues

One example of toxic masculinity is the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace. According to a 2016 study by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, up to 85% of women experience sexual harassment at work. This kind of behaviour is often perpetuated by men who feel entitled to women's bodies and use their power to harass or assault them. This not only harms the victims but also creates a hostile work environment that undermines productivity and morale.

Despite these negative effects, there are many examples of individuals and organisations taking steps to address and challenge toxic masculinity. One notable example is the #MeToo movement, which gained momentum in 2017, shed light on the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, particularly in the workplace (Corbett, 2022). According to a survey by the American Association of University Women, 81% of women and 43% of men reported experiencing sexual harassment in their lifetime (Chatterjee, 2018). The Harvey Weinstein scandal, in which multiple women accused the renowned Hollywood producer of sexual misconduct, highlighted the power dynamics and toxic masculinity prevalent in the entertainment industry. The movement exposed the toxic power dynamics and objectification of women perpetuated by some men in positions of authority. It prompted a broader conversation about consent, respect, and the need to challenge toxic masculinity to create safer and more inclusive environments for everyone (BBC, 2019; Lins et al., 2020).

LGBTQ+ Stigma and Homophobia

Toxic masculinity can also manifest in the form of homophobia and discrimination against individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms. LGBTQ+ individuals often face prejudice, harassment, and violence due to societal expectations of heteronormative behaviour. This toxic masculinity not only harms the LGBTQ+ community but also restricts the freedom of expression and self-identity for all individuals (Soto-Sanfiel & Sánchez-Soriano, 2023).

The experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals facing discrimination and violence due to toxic masculinity are well-documented. For instance, the documentary "The Death and Life of

Marsha P. Johnson" explores the life of a transgender activist and the challenges she faced in a society dominated by toxic masculinity. Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who was brutally beaten and left to die in 1998, became a symbol of the violence and hatred fueled by toxic masculinity (Kay, 2017).

To counter these harmful attitudes, The Trevor Project, an organisation providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ+ youth, reports that LGBTQ+ individuals contemplate suicide at nearly three times the rate of their heterosexual peers.

Fatherhood and Parenting

Toxic masculinity can even impact men's ability to be nurturing and involved fathers. Societal norms often dictate that men should be the primary breadwinners and prioritise work over family life. This can limit men's opportunities to develop strong emotional connections with their children and perpetuate the idea that parenting is primarily the responsibility of women (Stover, 2018; Fragada, 2022). The documentary "The Mask You Live In" explores the challenges boys face in conforming to traditional masculine norms, including the impact on their relationships with their fathers and their own development. According to the Pew Research Center, fathers in the United States spend, on average, significantly less time on childcare and household chores compared to mothers (Parker & Wang, 2013). Organisations like Promundo are working to challenge these norms and redefine fatherhood. Through programs like "Program P," Promundo engages men as caregivers and fathers, encouraging them to actively participate in parenting and challenge traditional gender roles. This approach not only benefits men but also

contributes to healthier family dynamics and more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities.

Traditional Gender Roles as Protective

Critics argue that traditional gender roles, including toxic masculinity, serve a purpose in providing stability and protection. They claim that traits like dominance and emotional detachment can be advantageous in competitive or crisis situations. They warn against challenging these norms, as it could disrupt societal order and undermine qualities like assertiveness and resilience (Neff, 2019).

A Call to Men

Tony Porter's TED Talk, "A Call to Men," highlights the harm caused by traditional masculinity and calls for its redefinition. He stresses that toxic masculinity is a learned behaviour that men can dismantle through self-reflection, empathy, and accountability. Porter emphasises challenging gender roles, rejecting the idea that vulnerability is weakness, and intervening against sexism and violence.

Education and awareness are key to addressing toxic masculinity. Porter advocates for comprehensive sex education covering healthy relationships, consent, and gender equality. These efforts aim to teach young people about the harmful effects of toxic masculinity and promote healthier expressions of masculinity.

Porter's talk aligns with the work of A Call to Men, an organisation he co-founded. They engage men in challenging harmful gender norms, preventing violence against women,

and promoting healthy masculinity. Through workshops, training programs, and advocacy, they encourage men to be agents of change and advocate for gender equality.

A Call to Men's Live Respect Coaching Program trains and supports young people in promoting healthy relationships, challenging harmful gender norms, and promoting equality and respect. The organisation offers workshops and training programs focused on preventing sexual harassment, promoting healthy masculinity, and challenging gender stereotypes. They also collaborate with policymakers and community leaders to advance gender equality and prevent violence against women.

A Call to Men is a significant force in the movement for gender equality and the fight against violence. Through their initiatives, programs, and advocacy, they strive to create a society where toxic masculinity is no longer the norm, enabling individuals to thrive in an environment of respect and equality.

Andrew Tate

Andrew Tate, a former kickboxing world champion and social media personality, has gained notoriety for promoting toxic masculinity. He encourages men to prioritise physical strength and dominance, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. Tate dismisses emotional vulnerability as a sign of weakness, limiting the range of acceptable expressions of masculinity. His comments about women are often objectifying and demeaning, reinforcing sexist attitudes and contributing to gender inequality (Das, 2022). While he has garnered attention for his controversial views, it is important to challenge and reject these perspectives. Promoting healthy masculinity involves embracing

emotional intelligence, empathy, consent, and respect. By doing so, we can foster a society that values and respects individuals of all genders.

Individual Agency and Personal Preferences

Opponents may argue that individuals have the agency to choose their own gender roles and behaviours. They assert that some men may naturally exhibit traits associated with toxic masculinity, and it should be respected as a personal choice rather than a societal problem. They believe that efforts to challenge toxic masculinity may infringe upon personal freedom and undermine the diversity of individual preferences and identities (Guy-Evans, 2023).

Cultural Relativism

Critics from a cultural relativist perspective argue that the concept of toxic masculinity is culturally specific and should be understood within the context of different societies and cultural norms. They suggest that what may be considered toxic in one cultural setting may be seen as normal or even desirable in another. They advocate for respecting and preserving cultural diversity rather than imposing a singular perspective on masculinity (McLeod, 2017; Österman, 2021).

APA on working with men and boys

The APA article, "Masculinity Identity: A Key Consideration for Men's Health Disparities," explores the influence of masculinity on men's well-being. Traditional masculine norms, often associated with toxic masculinity, can negatively affect men's health. These norms emphasize emotional restraint, self-reliance, and risk-taking, which may harm men's physical well-being by discouraging preventive healthcare and timely medical attention. However, masculinity itself is not inherently harmful. The article suggests strategies such as promoting gender role flexibility, encouraging help-seeking behaviors, and engaging men as allies to challenge toxic masculinity. By redefining masculinity and addressing harmful norms, we can foster healthier expressions of masculinity and improve men's health outcomes (Pappas, 2018).

Gender-Based Violence

The article "Causes and Consequences of Toxic Masculinity: Can HeForShe Be a Solution for Gender-Based Violence?" by Makhanya published in 2023, explores toxic masculinity, its origins, and its negative impacts on individuals and society. The article suggests strategies to challenge toxic masculinity and promote healthier expressions of masculinity.

The authors attribute toxic masculinity to patriarchal structures and the historical exclusion of women from power. They argue that toxic masculinity maintains male privilege and reinforces harmful gender norms. Toxic masculinity affects individuals by suppressing emotions and limiting emotional range. This can lead to mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Men's reluctance to seek help worsens the problem.

Addressing toxic masculinity requires education, awareness, and policy interventions. Challenging harmful gender norms through campaigns and promoting healthy expressions of masculinity are essential. Policy interventions, such as laws promoting gender equality and preventing violence against women, are crucial. They can support victims of gender-based violence and contribute to dismantling toxic masculinity.

Overall, Makhanya's article sheds light on toxic masculinity's harmful effects. By advocating for education, awareness, and policy changes, it offers ways to challenge toxic masculinity and foster healthier expressions of masculinity for a more equitable society.

Masculinity Problem

The opinion piece titled "Josh Hawley has a masculinity problem" published in The Washington Post in 2022, highlights a specific example related to toxic masculinity in the context of American politics. The author argues that Senator Josh Hawley's public image and rhetoric reflect a problematic form of masculinity that perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes.

The article contends that Hawley's political messaging leans heavily on traditional masculine values, such as physical strength, dominance, and an aggressive "us versus them" mentality. These traits, often associated with toxic masculinity, can contribute to polarisation, aggression, and the disregard for consensus-building and compromise in political discourse.

The author suggests that this kind of masculinity-driven approach to politics undermines the principles of collaboration, empathy, and respect that are necessary for effective

governance. The emphasis on assertive and confrontational behaviour can hinder constructive dialogue and compromise, ultimately impeding progress and exacerbating societal divisions.

Why Men Need to Embrace Femininity

A TEDx talk titled "Why Men Need to Embrace Femininity" by Joseph Gelfer. In this talk, Gelfer explores the importance of embracing femininity for men and challenging traditional notions of masculinity.

Gelfer argues that traditional masculinity often limits men's emotional expression, promotes aggression, and perpetuates harmful power dynamics. He emphasises the need for men to develop a more balanced and inclusive understanding of gender, one that embraces both masculine and feminine qualities.

The talk highlights that embracing femininity does not mean abandoning masculinity but rather recognizing the value of feminine qualities such as empathy, vulnerability, and nurturing. Gelfer suggests that by embracing a more holistic understanding of gender, men can foster healthier relationships, improve their own well-being, and contribute to creating a more equitable and inclusive society.

Men's Engagement in Gender Equality

Many organisations and initiatives are focused on engaging men in promoting gender equality. For example, the HeForShe campaign, launched by UN Women, encourages men to take an active role in advocating for gender equality and challenging harmful

gender norms. These efforts recognise that by involving men as allies and advocates, we can achieve more significant progress toward gender equality and address the negative effects of toxic masculinity.

Positive Role Models

Positive male role models who challenge traditional notions of masculinity and promote healthy behaviours and attitudes are crucial in addressing toxic masculinity. Celebrities such as Terry Crews, Justin Baldoni, and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson have spoken out about the importance of vulnerability, emotional expression, and respectful relationships. These individuals serve as examples of how men can reject toxic masculinity and embrace healthier forms of masculinity.

In conclusion, toxic masculinity represents a harmful set of beliefs and behaviours that negatively impact individuals and society. It perpetuates gender inequality, limits emotional expression, contributes to mental health issues, fosters workplace harassment, discriminates against the LGBTQ+ community, and hinders nurturing fatherhood. However, through awareness, education, challenging societal norms, promoting healthy expressions of masculinity, and engaging men as allies, we can dismantle toxic masculinity and create a more inclusive and equitable society. By embracing empathy, emotional intelligence, and respectful relationships, we can redefine masculinity, support individual well-being, and foster a culture that values the diverse experiences and identities of all genders. Together, we can build a future where toxic masculinity is no longer the norm, and where all individuals can thrive and live authentically.

Word Count: 2638

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