Male university peer-educator students remaking masculinities in the context of gender-based violence

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ABSTRACT

Widespread violence perpetrated by men against women has put masculinities under the spotlight. This article draws on the data from a broader qualitative study with male university peer-educator students (MUPES) in South Africa[1]. It focuses on MUPES' perspectives on the connections between masculinities and gender-based violence (GBV) and how they envision masculine transformation towards preventing GBV at universities. We worked with a purposefully selected group of MUPES and drew on theories of masculinities to thematically analyse the data from individual interviews and focus group discussions. The findings show that men are not always active producers of violence. While some intermittently reproduced hegemonic versions of masculinity that legitimate violence, most scrutinised and challenged the socio-cultural norms that valorise it. Not only did MUPES actively deconstruct some hegemonic masculine norms, but they also proposed a remaking of them and encouraged positive change in other men. We argue that male peer educators are valuable resources that may be engaged in university GBV intervention.

Keywords: university and violence, gender-based violence, peer education, male university peer-educator students (MUPES), potential change agents, gender transformation, progressive personalised masculinities (PPMs)

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global concern that plagues many aspects of society. Universities are not exempt, prompting much research. In South Africa, despite the country having a progressive constitution that prohibits any form of discrimination and violence, GBV

[1] **MUPES** refers to male university undergraduate students recruited and trained by the Campus HIV/AIDS Support Unit (CHASU) for passing HIV/AIDS education to their university peers.

rates are unacceptably high. As in other facets of society, the primary victims of violence on campus, worldwide, are women and gender non-conforming men, and the main perpetrators are men (Kaufman et al. 2019; Singh et al. 2016). This necessitates a deeper understanding of how men construct their personal, social, and sexual identities and puts masculinities under the spotlight. Our research sought to move beyond the construction of men as creators and vectors of violence, adhering to dominant masculine norms. Instead, we critically engaged with alternative forms of masculinity through the reflections and reconstructions of men who position themselves as leaders committed to the transformation of inequalities and prevention of violence on campus. This article draws on the data produced with a group of male university peer-educator students (MUPES) at a selected campus in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. It focuses on their perspectives on the connections between masculinities and GBV, and on their visions of masculine transformation towards GBV prevention at universities.

We drew on gender theories of masculinities as socially and culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. The biological determinism perspective views men and women as essentially different and opposite, thereby legitimating male power and female subordination. Investigating how men construct hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), which underscores how some masculine expressions are regarded as more powerful and valid than others, is critical in understanding male power. Hegemonic masculinity being constructed relationally to both subordinated masculinities and women (Messerschmidt 2019) reveals the mechanism men use to maintain dominance over women and other men, contributing to unequal gender relations from which GBV emanates. Understanding hegemonic masculine norms is vital, as they are essential components to disrupt in order to prevent GBV. Messerschmidt (2019) adds that it is critical to go beyond regarding hegemonic masculinities as embodied and show how they can be challenged and transformed, leading to possible progressive masculinities where men construct themselves more reflectively.

Our study focused on peer educators as research shows that peers can perform various community roles, including, but not limited to, educational institutions: education, activism, outreach, and counselling (Rose-Clarke et al. 2019). The problem of GBV at South African universities, where men are the main perpetrators, highlights the importance of understanding their perspectives on the scourge, and how they envisage their role in addressing it. We argue that engaging peer educators as potential role players in fighting GBV encourages them to reflect on their beliefs and practices, making them valuable resources that may be engaged in university GBV intervention.

MASCULINITIES, VIOLENCE, AND UNIVERSITIES

Considerable research has shown links between masculinities, men, and violence (Flood 2019; Graaff and Hienecken 2017; Hearn 2012; Morrell et al. 2013; Ratele 2014; Salazar et al. 2020). Hearn (2012) asserts that in many societies, men are responsible for different kinds of violence, ranging from violence towards an intimate partner to institutional violence. He acknowledges that violence is not a "fixed set of behaviours" and that not all men are actively involved in violence; still, he alerts us to most men's complicity in violence (Hearn 2012, 590). He argues that there is a need to be critical of men and their masculinities when studying them, suggesting there has to be a clear understanding of how masculinities are connected to violence (Hearn 2019). Jewkes, Flood, and Lang (2015) explain that the connection between violence and men may be related to social values, attributes, and societal expectations that engender gender (masculinities). Typically, these societal expectations manifest through hegemonic masculinities, the socially exalted forms resulting from and in unequal gender relations (Connell 2005; Messerschmidt 2019). The connection between hegemonic masculinities and violence is characterised by some context-specific gender norms, such as valorising men's heterosexuality, toughness, role as the household's head, perceived entitlement to sex, dominance over women, and financial provider status (Salazar et al. 2020; Graaff and Heinecken 2017). Violence can also emanate from men's exaggeration of traditional forms of masculinities, known as hypermasculinities, whose construction is predicated on a distortion that danger is gratifying and violence is a normal way of preserving men's power (Graaff and Heinecken 2017). Studies that focus on GBV at universities show how violence against women and gender non-conforming men is socially produced and connected to the expression of power and that sexual violence against women has been linked to men's sexual entitlement and women's objectification (Hirsch and Khan 2020; Phipps 2017).

However, not all masculinities contribute to violence. Some are gender transformative, not least those referred to by Salazar et al. (2020) as caring masculinities, whose construction centres around the rejection of men's dominance over women. On the assumption that reconstructing violent masculinities is a vital step toward eventually removing them, identifying more peaceable masculinities has given hope that involving men in the fight against violence could transform gender relations. For example, Casey et al. (2018) recognise men's potential role in violence prevention. Peacock and Barker (2014) assert that working with men appreciates that despite being the main perpetrators, as a social category, they also have valid reasons to end violence, which include having witnessed violence being perpetrated against women close to them, with Colpitts (2019, 429) contending that it is, therefore, improbable to achieve gender transformation without engaging "half of the equation" (men). To note men's

transformative experiences that can lead to more reflective constructions of themselves, sensitising experiences (Flood 2014), Gottzén (2019) borrows from Denzin (1989) the concept of epiphany, which refers to a troubling experience that positively influences a man's character, marking a turning point. Of course, such a turning point is not beyond critical scrutiny given the patriarchal gender order that tends to conceal and normalise violence and which men who commit to fighting against violence may be perceived to betray. Research has found that some men benefit from questioning their societal position, leading them to produce alternative and more progressive masculinities (Namy et al. 2015; Torres et al. 2012). Notwithstanding the task of preventing men's involvement from becoming an opportune platform to reinforce the very problematic patriarchal norms, getting them involved in critiquing their privileges is a step in the right direction toward gender transformation.

This study draws on gender theories that recognise multiple masculinities, asserting that as unfixed patterns of practice, masculinities are prone to change, giving rise to other forms. Connell (2005) asserts that hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to non-hegemonic forms. Swain (2006) asserts that some males construct personalised masculinities where they pursue their own forms of identity in their settings without challenging the existing hegemonic forms. Further research notes that men can produce progressive masculinities that challenge hegemonic ideals by constructing themselves differently and manifesting positive attitudes toward gender equality, suggesting the route to gender transformation (Agozino and Agu 2021; Elliott 2019; Ratele 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The data in this article is part of a broader study on male university peer-educator students' understandings of masculinities and their connection to GBV. This was a qualitative study in which we used purposive sampling to select participants from the Campus HIV/AIDS Support Unit (CHASU). Students belonging to CHASU were peer educators who volunteered to be trained to educate and support other students with respect to HIV and AIDS prevention and support. Given the connections between gender inequalities and HIV transmission, these peer educators were deemed suitable participants. Owing to the *Unit's* demographic at the time, the final study sample comprised 17 Black participants, even though race was not a significant determinant for participation. All participants were young male university undergraduate students in different years of study, ranging from first to fourth.

We obtained the gatekeeper's permission from the campus registrar and ethical clearance from the institution's Research Ethics Committee. Participants consented to participate and be audio recorded, and we informed them that they could withdraw at any stage of the process.

While the study was not planned to engender stress, participants were advised to consult the student counselling should their participation lead to anxiety. The larger study utilised various data generation methods: a mapping workshop, 17 semi-structured individual interviews, and two focus group discussions (FGDs) with drawings. This article draws on the data from the interviews and FGDs that were transcribed verbatim. To identify and analyse patterns in the qualitative data generated, we used thematic analysis, inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). We embarked on the process by familiarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, and defining and naming themes.

We recognised the importance of reflexivity in research and the potential impact of the researcher's positionality (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). To mediate this, the first author, a Black Zulu male, conducted the interviews. However, this simultaneously had advantages and challenges. The first author was both an insider concerning shared identity qualifiers with most participants regarding race, language and cultural norms, and gender, and an outsider, researching to understand specific phenomena from their perspective as peer educators.

FINDINGS

The data analysis of MUPES' perspectives on the connections between masculinities and gender-based violence and how they envision masculine transformation towards preventing GBV at universities resulted in two themes: Scrutinising Traditional Masculinities and Remaking Masculinities. We discuss these below, followed by a discussion of the findings and, ultimately, the conclusion.

Scrutinising Traditional Masculinities

The MUPES recognised the inequality associated with traditional notions of men as providers and heads of families; some saw it as something of the past. This is evident in Celimpilo's explanation: "When they said the man is the head of the family, that was another era; now we live in another era," and Simo's claim that "culture evolves," and Nkululeko's emphasis that "In South Africa, we [were] all free[d] [in] 1994". With such articulations, they considered traditional masculinities no longer relevant. They suggested a dynamism of gender norms, thus constructing progressive masculinities that are amenable to reconfiguring gender relations at the expense of problematic masculine benefits that engender gender inequality. In concurrence, during the interview, Freedom proposed a change in the culture:

> "I do not condone this thing [men's headship] because…we both need each other… in some families, men are unemployed, and a powerful person is a mother… [as a] breadwinner…So, this

> culture should change because perhaps it…worked for our great grandfathers, who were not educated… as an educated and civilized generation, it does not work, and we must change this thing…"

In scrutinising the men's headship notion, which results from such normative masculine gender roles as the breadwinner, Freedom questioned its validity, recognising that women are equally capable of fulfilling the same perceived prerequisite roles as men. Freedom's understanding of this notion as assigned with power is evident, which suggests that acknowledging the fluid nature of gender roles translates into embracing the power of both men and women. This destabilises the traditional fabric of culture, particularly Zulu culture. He points to fluid gender roles, where the notion of headship in the family should not be gendered. He rejects the masculine default, where characteristics, behaviours, and practices socially associated with the male gender role are valued and considered essential parts of a particular cultural context (Cheryan and Markus 2020).

Similarly, Innocent bemoaned the normalisation of masculine defaults within the Zulu culture by saying, "The way our culture views a man and a woman is suppressive because credit is not given to women…there are women who are men in their families. In my case, my mother is my mother and my father because as I am here at university, it is because of her." Innocent's view raises two crucial points. First, it reveals the double standards in his culture regarding praiseworthy gender roles for men and women, whereby any role is deemed inferior unless performed by or associated with a man. Second, it demonstrates how men can be complicit in that which they are trying to challenge due to deep-seated cultural learnings, that is, saying "there are women who are men" and that his mother is simultaneously a mother and a father, reinforces the very problematic perception that any role has to be associated with a man to be considered valuable. This shows how challenging socio-cultural gender norms necessitates men to be constantly reflexive, but more importantly, how a positive change in traditional masculinities (even if fraught with contradictions) should still be understood to be pointing in the direction of gender transformation. Indeed, in acknowledging shifts in men's understandings of masculinities which inform GBV, it remains essential to interrogate the problematic "gendered [male privileging] messages" still characterising the condemnation of socio-cultural norms (Pascoe and Hollander 2016, 76).

The MUPES challenged the dominant gender norms that commonly prevent men from behaving more freely as humans rather than as mere social beings. For example, during the FGD1, the MUPES unanimously challenged the traditional Zulu notion that "indod' ayikhali, ikhalela ngaphakathi' [a man does not cry but keeps the pain to and within himself], with Celimpilo emphasising "those are the things that I think we must try and turn around." In

concurrence with his fellow participants who shared perspectives from a Zulu cultural standpoint, during the individual interview, Gugu, from his Xhosa culture's point of view, said, "…culture has a wrong philosophy that men should not cry…culture…got it all wrong…they got it all wrong". This norm portrays men's expressiveness as a weakness, equating masculine emotionalism with femininity (McAllister, Callaghan, and Fellin 2019). Regardless of its dominance across the two cultures, the MUPES distanced themselves from this norm, constructing a progressive form of masculinity that could change gender relations. For instance, to disassociate himself from the norm, Lucky, during the individual interview, said, "My understanding is that a man should not be a person who should be strong in everything but…who is able to voice out his opinion, even emotionally…if he feels like crying, he should be given a chance to cry." There seems to be a rhetorical question that arises from Lucky's articulations: who should give men "a chance to cry"? The answer to this question, an implicit assertion in his explanation, is that society needs to change and be more conducive to non-limiting gender identities and equitable relationships. The shared view on masculine emotionalism by the MUPES suggests that men are not inherently stoical but that their expressiveness is socially exceptionalised in conformity with the hierarchical gender relations, where femininity and the perceived associated behaviours (enacted by either men or women) are regarded as inferior and symbolic of weakness. The MUPES' articulations on masculine emotionalism challenge gender inequality instead of reinforcing it by actively following gendered social scripts that create ground for GBV.

Remaking Masculinities

The notion of a 'real man' has featured prominently in masculinity discourses to reinforce hierarchical masculinities. This notion is typically used to label problematic masculinities as positive, though it has gained its perceived prestige through questionable practices. Being critical of the use of this notion to suggest acceptable behaviours and practices, the MUPES expressed a counter perspective; for example, Njabulo, during the individual interview, said:

> "…using the word 'real' to define a man means that even if those characteristics are negative…they describe a real man. It means [the] word 'real' has been used to manipulate people. Culturally, they meant good to define a real man as a protector, but now **they** [men] have manipulated all of that into their own agendas."

The way Njabulo distanced himself (using "they") from the conservative conceptualisation of the notion of a 'real man' while embracing another, "a protector," suggests the difficulty of deconstructing deep-rooted dominant masculine norms. In his attempt to problematise the 'real

man,' Njabulo invoked his cultural gender norms to indicate that there has been a masculinity-driven manipulation of what might have been well-intentioned. Despite the temptation to associate 'a protector' with complicit masculinities that seek to reinforce hegemonic masculinities, the context within which this norm (protector) was raised was inadequate to justify associating it with complicity. Suffice it to state that the notion of a protector, even if imagined positively, promotes male dominance in gender relations. Despite the 'real man and protector' contradiction, to highlight the incompatibility of his understanding of the word 'real' with some practices on campus, Njabulo further explained:

> "This [university campus] society believes that a real man makes his girlfriend submit to him, beats his girlfriend, drinks alcohol, [and] has many girlfriends. And if I have friends who believe in that, I would want to do the negative things [to] become a real man. As I [do] that, I would think I am becoming a real man while moving away from being the real man I was."

As evident in the typical example from Njabulo, the MUPES' articulations of a 'real' man can be understood in terms of rejection, reconceptualisation (explained further in the following excerpt), and retention. They rejected the excerpted negative behaviours and practices linked to the notion but also associated it with perceived positive behaviour, which explained it being retained. Challenging the notion of a 'real' man simply by realigning it with positive practices may feed into internal dominance among men in the hierarchy of masculinities. For example, as MUPES are elevated and exalted (for more equitable understandings), other men are relegated for their perceived conservativeness. That said, the promotion of progressive masculinities enacted by some men should not in and of itself be considered problematic. While it is important to understand how men construct or deconstruct masculinities, understanding how they reconstruct them is critical (Scheibling 2020). To this end, we were attentive to how the MUPES had reconceptualised the notion to realign it with progressive masculinities. Given what seemed to be a confusing connotation of a 'real man,' MUPES emphasised that when they used the word 'real,' they were talking about a different real man (DRM), adding a new dimension to the concept. For example, Mongezi, during the individual interview, explained:

> "A real man…is responsible…admits and apologises when he has made a mistake,…takes charge in situations,…protects his loved ones, [is] a leader, [and] is the first to take a step forward… listens to a female voice and does not make a decision with friends and expects his girlfriend to implement [it]."

While Mongezi's articulations show how the DRM is a better concept that can encourage men to construct themselves differently, they highlight how dominant masculine norms (a protector and a leader) can still feature (even minimally) in the promising gender transformative

constructions, underscoring patriarchal effects. This indicates the complexity of deconstructing and reconstructing better masculinities, suggesting that engaging men should be a continuous process that allows continued reflection. Nevertheless, characterising a DRM as someone who "listens to a female" lends itself to protest masculinities that present an alternative to hegemonic forms and as such, is progressive. As Singh (2016) asserts, men's preparedness to listen to their partners valorises communication and contributes to equitable relationships.

The DRM concept was a reconstruction resulting from MUPES' reflections on their gender roles. For example, Delani, during an individual interview, said:

> "Before, I used to believe that a man is someone who stays away from home chores [and] focuses on outdoor activities. But…I have realised that as much as I am a man, I can take responsibility. Nowadays, women are allowed to go to work, so at some stage, it could happen that I am left home with kids. So, if I cannot cook, …my kids will suffer. But if I understand that my wife's responsibilities are also mine, things will be OK because it would mean that even if a baby needs to be changed [diapers], I will do so. In the kitchen, I also need to know what is going on. I need to cook because my wife could fall sick. [If I don't cook], would that mean we don't eat? Even when it comes to washing, I would do that as a man."

Unlike Njabulo and Mongezi, who implicitly referenced the dominant masculine norm (a protector), Delani did not, as his understanding of what constitutes equality in gender relations was characterised by non-binary gender roles between men and women. This suggests there has been a paradigm shift, and gender-equitable relationships are possible if men give up their patriarchal privileges that predetermine the nature and scope of their social interactions. Delani's articulations on gender relations lend themselves to caring masculinities that disassociate men from constructions that valorise traditional masculine gender roles and treat with exceptionalism any feminine elements from men (Scheibling 2020).

Sexual prowess and the perceived irrepressible sex drive are some of the dominant notions that contribute to the perpetration of sexual abuse against women, a form of GBV. However, MUPES, in varying degrees of reflexivity, constructed themselves differently concerning sexual activities. For instance, Sphiwe, responding to the question in the interview about whether he would stop sexual activity when asked to by his partner, said, "Yeah, just in seconds I would stop. A real man respects a woman; if she says no, you stop… tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, I still have a chance." Sphiwe's articulations challenge the understanding of sex as something men are entitled to. Instead, his response removes the power assigned to men regarding sex initiation and promotes negotiation. What Sphiwe continued to explain about the same question cannot be ignored, "…there are small things that could end up putting you into trouble, like when she says no and you continue persuading her, you never know the following

day she may claim that you raped her so if she says no! It's no!" While his former position was gender-transformative (respect for a woman, suppressing his sexual desires), the latter raises issues of fear of possible repercussions of his actions, which could mean that negotiating sex rather than using force was a strategy, perhaps by default, to put himself first (avoiding being charged for rape), which might not translate to mean he understood the damage that violence causes to women. Notwithstanding this possibility, fear is not associated with constructions of dominant masculinities, but bravery and risky sexual behaviours are (Rich, Nkosi, and Morojele 2015). Thus, how Sphiwe responded to the question suggests that men can deconstruct certain elements of troubling masculinities for better ones.

Some MUPES took a more precise position in responding to the above question, as was evident during the interview with Celimpilo, who said, "Yes, I would stop because sexual intercourse is not meant to satisfy only one person but both partners. So, if a girl says no, it's obvious that there is something wrong with her at that moment. So, if you try to continue, you will worsen the situation." Not only do Celimpilo's articulations deconstruct the notion of men's entitlement to sex, but they also militate against women's objectification concerning sex, whereby their sexual desires are traditionally treated with negativity to naturalise men's. Acknowledging that women are equally desiring beings rather than objects of desire is an essential step towards progressive masculinities that undermine the problematic socio-cultural norms. These norms have a negative impact on gender relations, and it may take continued engagements with men before they can reflect and disabuse themselves of these norms. It seems that peer education is a conducive platform for facilitating such reflection by men. For example, Delani, in his interview responding to the same question, explained, "Yes, now I would stop, but before peer education, I would not stop. Instead, I would think she is undermining me. Now that I am informed, the minute she says stop, I would stop and check with her because there are many possible reasons." Attributing a change in his attitude to peer education suggests that it is a platform where young men can get a chance to renegotiate their masculinities in line with the desired gender-relation imperatives, namely equality and equity. With the help of peer education, it appears Delani would not think that being rejected was tantamount to power subversion by a woman, which might have led to the perceived justified violence. This characterises peer education as vital for gender transformation within university settings.

During the focus group discussions (FGDs), MUPES challenged each other's views as they renegotiated their masculinities. They reflected on gendered social norms differently. While some treated some norms as inheritable and transgenerational, others claimed that the young generation has the agency to transform those norms. During FGD1, explaining how men tend to construct themselves in accordance with other men, Delani said, "If I grew up in a

family where my dad used to beat up my mom, when I grow up and have a girlfriend, I would also do the same." Not only does this comment suggest how Delani found it challenging to maintain his earlier position (expressed in the interview) on issues emanating from gendered social norms, perhaps due to their deep-seated nature, but it also highlights how men can construct themselves differently depending on their social setting (individual interview or focus group discussion). This confirms that masculinities are always under construction (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2002). However, the FGD setting was also an important one for MUPES to dismantle problematic masculinities, helping each other reconstruct better ones, as was evident in Bafana's response during the same FGD:

> "I would like to differ [from] what he (Delani) said. For example, let's say there are two boys in a family; one wants to grow up and do what the father is doing, and the other to do something different [from] what the father is doing...one can grow up wanting to change the situation, he may want to respect women. So, he may grow up and avoid by all means being a perpetrator [of violence]."

Bafana's view denaturalises GBV and encourages men's agency to valorise nonviolent ways of being men, characterising GBV as not a women's issue. This suggests that if oppressive gender norms are socially constructed, they can be deconstructed, and better ones reconstructed. This depends on how much privilege men have invested and the extent to which they are committed to realise the unjustifiability of those social benefits, thereby facilitating disinvestment. The men's capability to curb what might otherwise appear to be a transgenerational form of violence was also evident in Abongwe's articulations during the individual interview when he said, "…at home there used to be…violence. So, I would say that [situation] helped me to see that violence is not a good thing…it was painful." This suggests that men's direct experience of violence does not automatically lead to further violence; instead, it could be a significant turning point with a possibility of doing 'gender' differently. This is consistent with an epiphany and sensitising experience marking a man's turning point in gender relations (Flood 2014; Gottzén 2019). Therefore, while a binary approach is discouraged, dealing with GBV as a men's issue (either as victims of dehumanising patriarchal norms or as the social category in the direction from which violence comes) is a preferable route to gender transformation.

DISCUSSION

The findings show how MUPES reflected on dominant constructions of masculinities and their connections to GBV. They saw themselves as change agents and constructed themselves progressively concerning GBV. Their articulations show that this was not a simple linear

process. Most MUPES acknowledged men's culpability concerning GBV perpetration and challenged some dominant masculine norms that create grounds for the scourge. They envisaged their role as influential male students as one of deconstructing oppressive masculinities and reconstructing more equitable ones to improve gender relations on campus. One example of a hegemonic masculine norm that underwent deconstruction and reconstruction was the notion of a 'real' man, which has been associated with gender inequality and violence by men. In the quest for more equitable gender relations, MUPES reconstructed the concept of a different real man (DRM) and associated it with amenability to men's equality with women. This suggests that while men are culpable of GBV, they can construct themselves differently, suggesting that neither harmful nor progressive masculinities are inherent parts of their being but mere changeable constructions. While there are social underpinnings and effects on how men construct themselves, the findings suggest that personalised constructions prioritising one's choices are possible. Although the idea of a DRM might only lend itself to 'aspirational' progressive masculinities, it is still indicative of MUPES' understanding of masculinities as unfixed, highlighting the importance for men to stop relying slavishly on dominant masculine prescripts as if they were natural. Perhaps at this stage, when men understand masculinities as constructed rather than natural, the next step to dealing with gender inequality and its manifestations, such as GBV, would be less challenging. The idea of removing masculinities (Flood 2015) is a plausible and desirable ultimate goal in addressing GBV. However, its plausibility necessarily requires acknowledging its complexity, to which no easy circumvention exists. Therefore, we argue that masculinity reconstruction leading to peaceful and progressive versions should be considered a crucial means to an end (rather than an end in itself) regarding equitable gender relations.

The findings show that peer educators are valuable actors on campus who demonstrated exemplary practices, as they saw themselves as different from other male students. They often positioned themselves as potential change agents concerning gender relations. Burrell (2020) asserts that there is nothing inherently different with men who support gender transformative initiatives, suggesting their distancing from other men, violence, and patriarchal norms need to be critically analysed. Notwithstanding this assertion, we argue that being critical of their own cultural masculine norms underscored MUPES' commitment to gender transformation. The notion of a man's headship in a family has been associated with harmful masculinities where men are considered providers and protectors at women's expense, reinforcing the notion of men's superiority. However, MUPES strongly challenged this norm and labelled it as outdated. To them, masculinities should not be dominant over femininities in order to address such issues as GBV; instead, there should be a normalised expectation of these social categories interacting

on an equal footing. Owing to the importance of knowing under which conditions male students can construct themselves differently, it is worth noting the role of peer education, which they referred to in the interviews and discussions. Because MUPES became peer educators by personal choice, we argue this was an adoption of an oppositional discourse with the agenda to challenge the existing hegemonic masculine norms on campus that fed into HIV and such related issues as GBV. Deconstructing the notion of a 'real' man and reconstructing a DRM exemplifies this clear agenda to change(ing).

This article builds on the concept of personalised masculinities: males' constructions wherein they pursue their own forms of identity, within their settings, with no cultural agenda that is prescriptive to other males' behaviour, and do not challenge hegemonic masculinities (Swain, 2006). In interpreting the data from the research in three schools in London, UK, Swain (2006) acknowledges that he utilised Connell's theories and concepts, such as hegemonic, complicit, and subordinated masculinities, but found these insufficient to analyse the real-life complexities in those settings, giving rise to the concept of personalised masculinities. In two of the schools, he noticed that "just because there [was] a culturally authoritative form of masculinity within each setting, it [did] not automatically follow that all boys (or men) [would] attempt to engage with, aspire to, or want to challenge it (either consciously or unconsciously)" (Swain 2006, 340). This reinforces the view that while men are a dominant collective, they are individual agents of social practices (Hearn, 2004); their personal behavioural choices with societal implications should not be neglected.

Moving beyond simply pursuing their own identity on campus, the present study's findings show that MUPES' masculinity constructions mostly had a progressive desire to move away from cultural rigidity towards its scrutiny, and towards deconstructing its problematic elements as a better way of being men on campus. This suggested that being a peer educator was not about 'being' but 'doing' something on campus, including renegotiating one's masculinity in line with the peer education mandate on social and health issues. We argue, therefore, that they constructed progressive personalised masculinities (PPMs), highlighting their envisaged role as potential change agents concerning GBV reduction. Given the campus-wide influence that MUPES had on other male students, becoming peer educators was a personal masculine achievement laden with a collective power to influence the campus culture on dealing with social and health issues, such as GBV and HIV.

However, there were some contradictions in the ways some MUPES constructed themselves. As they mainly promoted an oppositional discourse to the problem of hegemonic masculine norms on campus, MUPES' masculinity constructions should be understood as progressive, given their varying degrees of reflexivity. Therefore, rather than considering

men's contradictory masculinity constructions stumbling blocks to gender transformation, they should be taken as potential building blocks to progressive masculinities.

LIMITATIONS

It is important to acknowledge several limitations to this study. While it was part of a broader investigation focusing on male university peer-educator students' understandings of masculinities and their connection to GBV**,** the data drawn upon in this article concentrated mainly on how male university peer-educator students remake masculinities in the context of GBV. We recognise the intimate connections between race, culture, and masculinities which we may not have fully addressed. While it was not the intention of the sampling, given the demographics of the study location, the majority of the participants were Black African Zulu heterosexual men. This may create a false impression that the Black African Zulu masculinities are problematic and require specific attention. Future research should seek to elicit data from a broader sample in terms of race, culture, and sexuality.

This small-scale qualitative study included only a small sample from one university; generalisation beyond this sample is not intended. While data saturation was reached, the findings should not be taken to suggest the typicality of the practices described among male peer education students.

CONCLUSION

The MUPES' articulations noticeably vacillated between hegemonic and progressive masculinities, resulting in sporadic contradictions. However, the vehement ways in which they interrogated some dominant masculine norms in their determination to see a change in society suggested better versions of masculinities that could be associated with possible gender transformation. Separating the two conflicting constructions were moments of reflection through reworking, rejecting, or reproducing some of the hegemonic masculine norms. These findings challenge any temptations to reify masculinities as unchanging. This article's findings suggest that masculinities are not always or only connected to GBV perpetration but sometimes its reduction through progressive constructions. Achieving gender transformation calls for men to be more critical of themselves as a social category and be willing to give up all the privileges that come with traditional masculinities. Therefore, engaging male peer-educator students as an influential and powerful group on campus facilitates the construction of more progressive masculinities and is vital for gender transformation and GBV reduction at universities.

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