Configuring traditional masculinities among young men in northwestern Ghana: Surveillance, ambivalences, and vulnerabilities

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Abstract: Most academic scholarships, particularly from the global North continue to theorize African men, especially poor black men as problematic, abusive, and violent. Such scholarship often fails to foreground how men's gendered subjectivities are likely to be shaped by intersecting inequalities. The danger of such neglect is that African men continue to be pathologised as being unable to cope with western liberal conception of gender equality. Drawing on interviews with young men in northwestern Ghana, our findings highlight those young men may construct masculinities and femininities in ways that reproduce harmful gender norms, relations, and power inequalities. Despite the problematic constructions of gender, the narratives of participants appear to offer some potential in imagining alternative masculine discourses which reject and resist hegemonic masculine ideals. Based on this, we argue that a sincere appreciation of how young men may progress towards imagining progressive masculine subjectivities ought to develop clearer

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In the past years, academic interest in critical understanding of what it may mean to be a man in a complex and diverse context as Africa has grown beyond a single disciplinary circle. Given such growing interest, there is still need to complicate the everyday gendered subjectivities of men, especially young men as they attempt to claim credibility as men. This study contributes to this conversation in two main ways. First, the authors demonstrate how young men in northwestern Ghana may construct masculinities and femininities in ways that seem to reproduce harmful gender norms, relations, and power inequalities. Second, while being critical of problematic constructions of gender, the narratives of participants appear to offer some potential in imagining alternative masculine discourses which reject and resist hegemonic masculine ideals. The implication of these two conflicting narratives is that any sincere appreciation of the everyday gendered subjectivities of young men ought to develop clearer understandings of the ambiguities, ambivalences, and conflicting appeals of multiple voices of masculinities.
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Around the world, masculinity studies have gained prominence among academic scholars, social activists, and development practitioners to the extent that it has become an important transcultural, transdisciplinary, and transcontinental “industry” (Dery and Apusigah, 2020). The growing purchase of masculinity studies has inspired productive transnational debates, dialogues, and exchanges of ideas among diverse scholarly constituencies (e.g., Hearn & Robbert, 2012; Shefer, Hearn et al., 2015). These transnational debates have highlighted the existence of multiple masculinities within and across diverse historical, social, and cultural contexts. Accordingly, there are and will always be varying notions of what it may mean to be a man within a specific cultural space. These notions are shaped by a multitude of influences, such as geography, politics, age, ethnicity/race, culture, economics, social class, sexuality, religion, and history (Dery, 2019; Langa 2020; Lindsay & Stephan, 2003; Smith 2017). In view of the intersectionality of these influences in shaping constructions of masculinity, there is need for critical reading of men’s gendered subjectivities in ways that might reveal complexities and nuances. In particular, there has been heightened debate on the need to critically engage men’s adherence to problematic masculine subjectivities while simultaneously paying close attention to the possibility of promoting more equitable masculine subjectivities among men, especially from the global South (Langa 2020; Ratele, 2015). While questioning men’s tolerance for violence against women and other men, these authors maintain that such engagement must be done carefully in ways that do not reproduce (unintentionally) alienating and stereotypical narratives which often characterize black subjectivities. These scholars argue that black masculine subjectivities are much more complex and diverse, and their complexities and diversities must be accounted for in any academic conversation seeking to complicate monolithic and homogenized discourses. For example, in offering ethnographic accounts of the everyday gender performances of young black men in Alexandra, South Africa, Langa found that multiple voices of masculinity beckon at these young men. Amidst these multiple and conflicting voices were those that invite young men to engage in activities such as violence and gangsterism as being central to the very configuration of manhood. Despite these tendencies, Langa’s study offers compelling evidence of ambivalence, self-doubt, vulnerability, and hesitation in young men’s approaches to alternative masculinities. Even as young men attempt to negotiate multiple voices of masculinity, most of Langa’s participants appear to comply with dominant tropes of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously exploring the possibility of imagining masculine values that are non-violent, non-sexist, and non-risk-taking. Informed by the difficulties that may confront young men in their journeys to becoming men, especially in a context where men may struggle to acquire ideals capable of defining them as “real men” (Cornwall & Lindisfarne 2016; Smith 2017), it is important for scholars to take seriously Africa in its complexity and diversity. Such scholarly intervention should reflect on how socioeconomic pressures, conditions, and tensions may encourage men’s adherence to conflicting masculine subjectivities in Africa (Boonzaier, 2018; Dery, 2019; Langa 2020).

Building on the argument advanced by these scholars articulated above, we pay close attention to how different masculinities play out in the everyday lives of young men in northwestern Ghana. We particularly consider and address the potential of new masculinities to emerge and how the emergence of alternative masculinities may contribute to disrupting gendered practices. Gendered practices, including division of labor in the domestic arena uphold inequalities in families and society broadly. Yet, the narratives of young men in this local context are much more complex and diverse as they attempt to navigate between masculinities. We approach these navigations as deeply discursive attempts whereby young men are confronted by two situations of adhering to traditional gender scripts and challenging hegemonic ideals. The reflections of young men in this
study offer some possibility in thinking more deeply on what may constitutes locally constructed masculinities. Even as the concept of caring masculinity emerged in Anglophone contexts, we draw on the theoretical resources of caring masculinities as advanced by Elliott (2016). We reflect on the formation of masculine identities that may challenge traditionally hegemonic masculine ideals. We demonstrate the ambivalence and struggles that young men may encounter in imagining alternative, more caring masculine ideals. Even as the reflections of some of our participants reveal potential in progressing toward alternative masculinities, they seem to be constrained by specific societal, socio-cultural, and local gender scripts.

Our work builds on and extends ongoing debates by foregrounding a contextual understanding of the complex processes young men journey through in becoming men. We elucidate how context shapes the formation of alternative masculinities and the consequences of embracing caring masculinities. Our findings offer important contextual insights on how young men in northwestern Ghana may negotiate multiple voices of masculinity in ways that may both reinforce and challenge prevalent masculine norms.

1. Theorizing African men and their gendered subjectivities
   
   In recent years, it has become important (methodologically and theoretically) to think through and think from Africa in ways that might reveal nuances and complexities of African men as gendered subjects (Dery, 2019). Such scholarly interventions have contributed significantly to deepening the ecologies of knowledge on African men and masculinities in ways that challenged theories, epistemologies, and concepts developed mostly from the global North (e.g., Mfecane, 2016). While we are not entirely against the use of Western-centric theories, epistemologies, and concepts to analyze pertinent issues of concern in Africa, our sense is that such theories, epistemologies, and concepts may not have the capacity to capture complex empirical realities of being a man in Africa and what these complexities may mean for imagining alternative masculine subjectivities. In our attempt to indigenize what it may mean to be a man; we suggest that African men and boys ought to be approached and theorized as gendered social subjects within their multiple and often conflicting locatedness (Mfecane, 2016; Langa 2020; Smith 2017). These scholars argue that most studies often focus the gaze on highlighting examples of harmful behaviors, norms, and practices among African men and boys and less is said about men who may question, disrupt, challenge, support, and/or contradict dominant masculine ideologies and norms. Situating their critique of dominant narratives which continue to approach, present, and theorize African men, male subjectivities, and masculinities often using the character of profound “extraversion” (to borrow the words of Paulin Hountondji), these scholars call for a careful reading of African men and masculinities in a manner that might reveal tensions, complexities, nuances, and potentials for transformation.

   While the literature on African masculinities is extensive and it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage adequately the different streams of arguments, much of the existing scholarship are still framed through Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity. The effectiveness of Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity as an important organizing and theoretical lens has been both praised and critiqued (e.g., Dery and Apusigah, 2020; Demetriou, 2001; Mfecane, 2016; Morrell et al., 2012; Ratele, 2015). African scholars such as Kopano Ratele and Sakhumzi Mfecane have advised researchers and academics interested in African masculinities to be wary of the risk of importing wholesale, Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity into Africa since African cosmology of personhood or what defines one as “a person” is deeply complex and intersected by a multitude of socio-cultural, historical, and political influencers. We would argue that Europe-centric/Western epistemologies and theories that are often deployed as benchmarks to measure what it may mean to be “a man” within a deeply complex context as Africa may not have the capacity to account for the empirical complexities inherent in African masculinities and femininities. This fundamental flaw in dominant theorizing on African men often fails to account for
contextual complexities and sophistications around the meaning of manhood and what these complexities may mean for effective gender mobilization and transformation.

Building on dominant critiques among African masculinity theorists (e.g., Ratele, 2015; Shefer, Kruger et al., 2015), we would suggest that contextual complexities around the meaning of “being a man” in Africa are vastly shaped by the interaction and intersection of gender, sexuality, class, religion, poverty, power, age, history, (dis)ability, location, and ethnicity/race. We are of the view that critical scholarship which takes seriously African masculinities in their complexity must not only be interested in understanding how dominant tropes of manhood are mobilized, configured and circumnavigated among men, but how such configurations are also subject to contestations, re/negotiations and transformation over time and space. Such scholarship, we suggest, should also pay critical attention to how men’s performances and negotiations of social subjectivities are thoroughly shaped and mediated by neoliberal capitalism, intractable poverties, migrancy, economic precarity, rising levels of un(der)employment, and highly precarious and unpredictable labor markets. As we seek to argue in this article, critical scholarship and activism about African men’s imagining and progressing towards more progressive and liberatory configurations of masculinities (Ratele, 2015) must demonstrate a great latitude of committed in reflecting on how these markers impact on less dominant notions of masculinities in the continent. Towards this end in this paper, we focus our attention primarily on the intersections of gender, race, and culture.

OASS_A_We also contend that any productive conversation about the need for alternative masculinities must talk about the place of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in perpetuating and recreating unequal world order. These global bodies continue to place heavy restrictions and sanctions on public sector employment in most postcolonial African states, including Ghana. For example, Ghana recently (in April 2019) managed to exit from an economic bailout deal with the IMF which put an embargo on employment in the university sector specially and the broader economy. Such policies embedded within various forms of Structural Adjustment Programmes are a major source of concern as they frustrate men in fulfilling their breadwinning mandate and building better social profiles.

OASS_A_As we approach and theorize African male subjectivities and lived experiences as complex configurations of specific historical, cultural, political, and social discourses (Boonzaier, 2018; Ratele, 2013; Morrell et al., 2012), this article is concerned with two main questions: How might young men in rural northwestern Ghana conceptualize and make sense of their masculine identities? To what extent are young men’s masculine aspirations supporting, contesting, and resisting patriarchally hegemonic masculine ideals and practices? We ask these questions with the aim to attempt to offer contextually nuanced articulations that may contribute to challenging and disrupting dominant global narratives that tend to pathologize, homogenize, and consume African men and their masculine subjectivities with much simplicity. Situating our argument within the imperative of decoloniality, we are alert to, and critical of, how historical and contemporary discourses, neoliberal capitalism, and current global world order continue to shape the lives and subjectivities of black men in postcolonial African contexts, especially in Ghana (see Anonymous 2019). Situating our analysis within critical feminist intersectional understanding on the empirical realities of Africa (Ratele, 2015; Shefer, Hearn, et al. 2015), we propose to read and analyze how a cohort of young men in northwestern Ghana talk about and make sense of their masculinities from a bigger decolonization debate. Without being critically empathetic and sensitive to the complexities of African masculine subjectivities, attempting to engage men to embrace liberatory gender discourses may yield less success (Ratele, 2015).

In view of the discussion above, our research contributes to ongoing debates by drawing on the lived experiences of men in the postcolonial context of Ghana. We draw on the lived experiences of young men in northwestern Ghana (one of the poorest regions in Ghana) to learn
more about how they make sense of their masculinities in ways that might engineer social change in their social networks and larger communities.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

The empirical data for this article form part of a larger qualitative study, which explores masculinities and gender-based violence in northwestern Ghana (one of the poorest regions in Ghana). In this article, we focus mainly on the narratives and lived experiences of 15 young men between the ages of 18 and 25 years, on their perceptions of masculinities. This age range represents a critical point of transitioning, negotiating, externalizing, and imagining the meanings of credible masculinity. The paper focuses on the stories and narratives of this cohort of men because research has shown that the household divisions of labor which children are taught during adolescence are important determinants of their reception and adherence to specific gender roles at age 19 and above (Cunningham, 2001). Most of these young men are of low educational background with limited migratory experience. Participants were also drawn from different socioeconomic back-grounds with most of them coming from families who practice subsistence farming for a livelihood.

At the time of our interviews, a few of these participants were married while others were in active heterosexual relationships. Participants spoke Dagaare as the primary language with intermittent use of English. All participants stated they were Christians.

Since we are interested in examining the complexity of growing up in a patriarchal society such as northwestern Ghana, narrative interviews were adopted as the most appropriate method. Using a semi-structured interview guide to prompt participants, questions such as “Tell me your story of growing up in this family?” and “What does it mean to be a young man in this community?” were asked. The aim is to uncover what participants make of their own experiences about masculinities and the contested (re)formulation of alternative masculinities. Asking question in this manner gives participants the opportunity to discuss at length what they saw and experienced while growing up. When participants had finished with their accounts, and in instances where critical discourses emerged, probing questions were asked.

2.1.1. Procedure

The first author (a native of the same cultural group) conducted all the interviews with individual participants between October 2015 and March 2016. Interviews took place mostly at the community center where safety and confidentially of both researcher and participants were assured. The first author also visited participants in their homes and playing fields in order to observe their behaviours and reception to specific behaviours. When there was sufficient agreement and rapport between the first author and prospective participants, interviews were arranged and conducted at time convenient to both the researcher and participant. Interviews lasted between 1 hour and 1 hour 30 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded in Dagaare with the permission of participants and later transcribed and translated into English by the first author. The transcripts were audited and validated against the main interview recordings by an independent researcher who understands and have experience in conducting research in the local language. Additionally, the transcripts were read to participants during various debriefing meetings. The aim was to ensure that the transcripts represent the stories of our participants.

The study received ethical approval from Anonymous University. Participants also gave verbal consent before participating in the study. In order to protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

2.2. Data analysis

After the interviews were translated and transcribed into English, we coded our data manually, using a line-by-line style of coding. Our data coding process was inductive and data-driven. Various codes were produced and compiled into meaningful categories and themes verified and audited by
the other authors. After all the themes were audited and agreed by all the three authors, we used critical discourse analysis to understand how language and particular discourses deployed by participants promote or limit certain practices in specific circumstances. Informed by our gender critical interest, we privilege a critical reading of how specific texts and discourses are used to position men in relation to the different discursive constructions inherent within a specific cultural context. Our analysis is equally informed by our interest in approaching texts and language as complex constructs that may enable a more critical reading of taken-for-granted discourses masked within pervasive cultural repertories and messages.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Reproducing gendered cultural discourses
This theme attempts to present participants’ descriptions and articulations of the range of social training that they underwent during boyhood. Throughout the interviews, it emerged that parents, especially fathers are somewhat invested in reproducing what seem to be gendered cultural discourses. These gendered cultural discourses, as we shall demonstrate shortly, operate to recreate, and re-inscribe gendered norms, subjectivities, and inequalities within the family space. Participants referred to one of the following phrases: “My father taught me to do this or that”, “My father trained me to be like or that”, “My father encouraged me to behave in this manner”, and “I was taught by my father to cherish this or that …”. These phrases became important points of reference which ultimately shaped participants’ approach to life as they become adults. Participants discursively relied on these discourses as important parameters when framing and making sense of their journeys in becoming social adults. Participants’ memories of growing up as boys and articulations of their current masculine dispositions were presented in ways that are gendered. Participants alleged that cultural discourses shape and mediate their interpretations and meaning-making of specific activities and situations within specific period and space. Situating his narrative within the relationality of gendered subjectivities, Albert, a-20-year-old participant from a subsistence farming family, expressed vivid memories of this process of regulating what boys were culturally allowed to do and what they were not allowed to engage in:

Growing up as a boy, my father expected me to engage in activities like wrestling, herding animals, and all the hard stuff while my sister was busy in the kitchen. You know, boys should be physically stronger than girls, and this determines what we were expected to do. That defined who we are.

The reflection of Dumee, a-25-year-old participant from a relatively well-resourced family, is similar to that of Albert as presented above. He explained further:

You know, ‘a hunter trains his son how to hunt’. A farmer does same. Boys are not taught kitchen stuff. Boys learn the hard stuff; things that can make them responsible. My father could punish me if I tried cooking. So, right now, I don’t even know how to cook basic food. That is not good enough. It is a shame.

The narratives of Albert and Dumee above reveal that the formation of gender identities for boys, as with girls, is a dynamic process full of ambiguities. Despite the dynamics, their reflections point to social pressures and societal expectations boys are likely to face in their journeys to becoming social adults. Informed by such social pressures and cultural expectations which are sustained and reproduced by parents, especially fathers, boys tend to internalize and adhere to rigid ideals and roles. These rigid ideals include ideas that boys should engage in risky activities such as wrestling, be physically tough by engaging in activities perceived to be hard, and be responsible. Within the context of this study, these ideals may be interpreted to be hegemonic relative to other ideals as far as local notions of boyhood and masculine practices are concerned. Even though performing domestic chores may involve using considerable energy, most participants thought otherwise. From these narratives, it emerged that most men are socialized to embody hegemonic gender norms in order to merit inclusion
into the social category of masculine subjects otherwise they risk being feminized. For example, men who fail to embody dominant traits on manhood means they are likely to be perceived in the eyes of society as not being man enough. Once a boy deviates from these cultural patterns of behaviors, a sanction, in the form of punishment is applicable illustrated by Dumee's comment that “My father could punish me if I tried cooking”. Men's adherence to hegemonic male norms has negative consequences to both men and women. The situation may adversely affect boys and men, women, and girls. It may frustrate feminist long-standing commitment and goals in developing a world where the roles and contributions of men and boys, women and girls are valued and respected equally. From their narratives, it is pretty clear that boys who engage in activities such as cooking are likely to be perceived differently. Yet, around the world, evidence does suggest that boys and men do challenge rigid ideals associated with masculinity (Barker & Ricardo, 2005). In the context of this study, the reflection of Dumee seems to be pointing to an interest in challenging rigid ideals of manhood; an interest constrained by entrenched socio-cultural norms. His lamentation that “I don’t even know how to cook basic food. That is not good enough” reveals a sense of frustration and disappointment in his inability to cook. Such frustration is further amplified by the phrase “It is a shame”. While the narrative of Dumee is suggestive of his own desire to learn and practice basic cooking skills, he appears to be constrained by such social sanctions (“My father could punish me if I tried cooking”). The fear of being punished by his father discouraged Dumee from exploring and using his cooking potentials.

Interestingly, Dumee's lamentation also reveals complexities on manhood. Such complexities suggest that not all boys and men may readily and actively promote rigid gender norms, but that men and boys' adherence to gender roles and norms is informed and shaped by time, culture, social class, and space. Therefore, Dumee's agency in actively challenging gender norms appears to be constrained by his own adherence to rigid norms of masculinity perpetuated by his father. What may potentially hinder gender transformation and imaginations of alternative masculine ideals in such a context is the existence of patriarchal figures like the father figure who enforces and punishes boys' behaviors that deviate from the prevailing social order. Boys and girls who do not fit neatly into the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, or who resist gender binaries (i.e., contesting the demands and hegemony of the ruling social order) are likely to be judged, criticized, and stigmatized (Helman & Kopano, 2016; Ratele et al., 2010).

Like many of our participants, Zuubaviel, a 20-year-old participant from a subsistence-farming family, thought it is a fact that boys should learn and practice “hard stuff” because that defines them as masculine subjects. He explained:

That’s the reality. When we were in basic school, our teachers punished us based on what we could do. Boys were punished to clear the bushes, while girls fetch water for the garden. Boys are born to be men and we cannot take it away. We can only be proud of that reality. Boys become men in the family and society. You and I know that, that is a fact here.

The narrative of Zuubaviel is interesting for a number of reasons. The interlocutor alleges of the natural dominance of masculinities over femininities and how these narratives are reproduced and sustained in multiple spaces, including school cultures. Zuubaviel refers to the cultural specificity and rootedness of what it may mean to be “a man” illustrated by “You and I know that that is a fact here”. This illustration speaks to how specific roles and behaviors are at once become naturalized within a particular cultural context. Zuubaviel's deployment of the word “here” (interpreted to mean specific geographic location) suggests that there are potentially alternative ways of demonstrating and doing gender elsewhere, although this was not explicitly articulated by him. Our study found that young men may live up to dominant demands of masculinity. They are likely to do this within collectively structured gender relations embedded in everyday peer-to-peer interactions, school cultures, and other social institutions.

Dan, a 23-year-old participant who was the first male child of his parent expressed sentiments similar to those narrated by Albert, Dumee, Zuubaviel, and many of his peers. Even though their
reflections were somewhat similar, they differ. Dan reflected on the role of the non-human realm in shaping conceptions and boundaries of masculinities and femininities prevailing in his local context. Dan draws a line on how the human and non-human worlds may interact to inform the continuity or discontinuity of specific modes of masculinity and femininity. His own concerns are at once complicated by multiple fears, ambivalences, and tensions on what society would make of him (as the first male child) when his father joins his ancestors. He explains further:

My father wanted me to be a responsible and worthy man in future [heir]. When your father dies, people remember him through what you [the son] do. Through your deeds, people are able to tell that you're the son of that man … “See, he behaves like his late father.” You know society watches what you do as a man.

In the excerpt above, Dan explains that his socialization was not only to teach him to be a “responsible and worthy man” in the eyes of society but that he should be seen to be an extension of ideals cherished by his father. While his father might have died and joined his ancestors (the non-human world), it is culturally expected that male children like Dan continue to perpetuate the legacies of their father in the human world. The tendency to remember non-living through the activities of their male children (living) is an important consideration that is likely to shape the kind of masculinities that adult men may invest in.

Our findings build on a growing body of literature (e.g., Mfecane, 2018; Niehaus, 2002; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) which takes seriously the centrality and influences of unseen, non-human elements that underpin the complexity of African cosmology of personhood and meaning-making. Our findings suggest that men may embody specific traits, norms, and behaviours not for their own sake, but because it is culturally believed that such behaviours and norms connect the living with the non-living selves. As illustrated in the excerpts above, the non-living world appears to play an important role in shaping the kinds of identities men may eventually inhabit.

Dan’s reflection suggests to us the composite and incomplete nature of human being. Like other scholars (e.g., La Fontaine 1985, p. 126; Mfecane, 2018; Niehaus, 2002), Dan’s narrative reveals both the material and immaterial component of human existence. The interlocutor moves on to suggest that his physical human body does not operate on its own-in-a vacuum. Instead, what he does as a social being is potentially influenced by other unseen elements. Accordingly, these unseen elements exert greater influence on the kinds of behaviour and character people like Dan is likely to embrace and also to propagate over time. These conceptions of what it may mean to a man in this local context encourage us to rethink how dominant western-centric theories on African masculinities tend to miss an important ontological consideration. Consistent with Mfecane (2018), our findings invite scholars interested in African-centred understanding of masculinities to move beyond mere evaluation of everyday performances and displays of gender scripts among men to accounting for the place of the unseen realm in shaping social subjectivities.

Dan’s explanations that “My father wanted me to be a responsible” speaks to the power of the father as a patriarchal figure in sustaining certain ideals and values. Similar explanations of masculine subjectivities were frequently articulated in most the interviews. While similar narratives of masculine subjectivities have been foregrounded in the literature, what should be of great concern to us is the idea that unseen elements play an important role in reinforcing specific social values and ideals. According to Dan, once his father wanted him to become a responsible heir while he was alive, it is his responsibility to live up to such social values even as Dan’s father is dead. To him, living up to these values represents an important way through which society remembers and perhaps celebrates his achievements illustrated by “people are able to tell that you're the son of that man”. Such narratives reveal complex insights that go beyond dominant Euro-centric gender frameworks which tend to theorize and analyze masculine subjectivities as purely a matter of the human realm. We would suggest that African masculinity research can be enriched significantly if close attention is paid to the interaction between the human and unseen...
elements in shaping popular understandings of masculine subjectivities. To most Africans who share and believe in the spirit of the ancestor as a super-natural being, the unseen realms form an important basis of social life.

In the following section, we present and analyze a few quotes that speak to the contestations, ambivalences, and complexities in the process of meaning-making of masculinity.

4. Disrupting and challenging gendered cultural narratives on masculinity

In a number of our interviews, some participants alleged that the economic demands were changing and that the gender landscape has not remained where it was years back. Most participants complained of economic hardships; a situation which troubles their sense of manhood. Economic success became a central measure of respectable masculinity. Yet, it is becoming increasingly difficult for young men to acquire dominant planks necessary for hegemonic masculinity. The struggles of young men becoming economic providers frustrate their masculine aspiration in developing better social profiles. We took these struggles as a useful starting point in understanding the kind of possibilities that such gender struggles may produce. We take seriously the complex means, processes, and opportunities by which young men are meant to observe, (un) learn, and negotiate what it may mean to be “a man” in this local context. For example, Andy, a 21-year-old high school student, recently returned to join his parents from an urban town where he lives with his paternal uncle. Andy thought that his parents did not help him enough in diversifying his sense of manhood when he was growing up as a boy in the village. In his reflections, he had aspired to become someone different from others in his community. He emphasized:

Growing up as a child was something. My parents did not help me that much as I have come to learn now. You know, over here, I mean in our culture, when a boy washes dishes, he is being mocked. People call you names.

Andy expressed the view that what he has been taught as part of his cultural socialization appear to contradict with gender norms in the city, where his uncle resides. Andy’s exposure to different cultural narratives in the city appears to be a useful starting point for him to begin to realize his aspiration of becoming a different man. He explained:

My uncle would tell me, “Andy, wash your dishes after eating”. He himself does wash his own dishes. In my father’s house, I mean, in our culture, washing dishes is girls’ work, not boys. Boys don’t wash dishes. That is what we have been taught. But whenever I return to the village, I help my mother in washing the dishes.

The narrative of Andy presents an interesting case in which boys may begin to reimagine what they have been taught by their parents when they exposed to a different teaching. While his narrative is indicative of some potential in challenging and possibly reconfiguring alternative masculinities. One needs to be careful not to over romanticize Andy’s claim of embodying discourses that aligned with feminist values to urban culture and middle-class subjectivities. Rather, it is critical to argue that such images of potential change, as articulated by Andy, are likely an outcome of his willingness to subject cultural norms and practices entangled in rural context to scrutiny. The interlocutor is aware that washing dishes in the village is stereotypical and emasculating since boys who engage in such activities are judged to be less of a man. Owing to a range of intersecting factors, such as Andy’s movement across different settings (village vs urban), social class (own family being poor vs middle-class as in the case of his uncle), and families (traditional vs gender-conscious), his journey to imagining diverse masculinities is structurally divided along two competing conundrums. First, Andy has to deal with stringent norms that govern and enforce gender binaries at his parents’ home in the village. Second, at the other side of the conundrum is the re-masculinization of Andy through the figure of a gender-conscious uncle as a patriarchal mentor. From these narratives, there is an unequivocal suggestion that context and manner of
people one encounters play significant role in shaping how boys are made and exposed to diverse forms of masculinities. Our findings corroborate those of Ratele et al. (2010), and alert us to understand that men’s willingness to resist and reject dominant masculinity norms appear to be connected to individual personal experience of boys, educational attainment, family income levels, and cultural receptivity.

The pedagogical and linguistic significance of Andy’s narrative, traversing different cultures and what this may mean moving towards more supportive ideals is remarkable. He presents himself as someone who supports feminist values, such as men being supportive partner. This is captured when he argues that “Whenever I return to the village, I help my mother in washing the dishes.” Andy’s narrative appears to align with feminist discourses on imagining masculinities beyond gender stereotypes and patriarchal myths. Yet, Andy seems to be confronted by a situation in which balancing culturally accepted ways of demonstrating manhood in the village compared against gender friendly values such as washing dishes in the city. Part of Andy’s dilemma is his own framing of his contribution in the domestic realm as being complementary to those of his mother. We would suspect that coding his participation in domestic activities as offering a helping hand to his mother in the village allows Andy to evade social stigma and names calling. This allows Andy to continue to benefit, implicitly, from the hegemony of heteropatriarchy associated with being a male (Connell, 1995).

The narrative of David, a 24-year-old participant from a middle-class family corroborates those of Andy articulated above. He posits that engaging in domestic chores as a man does not invalidate his masculine credentials. David proceeded to emphasize that:

Society always expects boys and girls to abide by different roles and norms. That defines you as a man or woman. For me, washing dishes does not make me less of a man. We need to teach our children to do things differently.

For other participants such as Francis, a 22-year-old participant from working-class family, resisting and/or ignoring peer pressure and names tagging is key to imagining alternative masculine discourses. He explained:

So, on this day, my mother went to the market and did not come early. I decided to go to the kitchen to cook for myself. When my friends noticed that I was cooking, they laughed at me. They told me that no woman would want to marry a man who will compete with her in her own space [kitchen]. They said all manners of things against me, but I didn’t listen to them. After all, who was hungry? For me, nothing stops me from cooking. I personally think that it is about time we stopped categorizing certain activities as meant for women and others for men.

Another participant, Paschal, a 25-year-old participant expressed similar experience in navigating gendered boundaries. He explains further:

As a man, I do not expect anyone from outside to bring peace into my family. Growing up as kids, we were told that men were supposed to work hard on the farms while women do domestic chores and take care of the children. However, now, I see things differently. When I return from the farm and see that my wife is busy with many activities, nothing prevents me from helping her. I like to help my wife in the domestic activities to reduce her workload. So, one day, my friends visited me and saw that I was setting up fire for my wife to cook. Upon seeing this, they laughed at me and asked me if my wife has travelled. Some even ridiculed me that I like food that is why. I ignored their comments. I told them that there is no defined activity meant for men or women. They called me several names and mocked me, but I never gave up.

As Francis fails to perform and abide by ruling codes of traditional masculinity embedded within his cultural context, he is discursively construed as a social deviant by his peers. Importantly, the
narrative of Francis and many other participants reveals that a certain degree of masculine vulnerability dangerously looms should a male-bodied person trespasses gendered boundaries. One important way through which young men’s masculinities are discursively monitored, sanctioned, and rewarded is peer surveillance. There is a strong articulation in almost all the 15 interviews to suggest that peer surveillance plays an important role in reinforcing popular notions of rural masculinity. However, some participants such as Andy and Francis expressed ambivalence about the traditional masculine norms and practices. Some participants seem to vacillate the disciplinary mechanisms and surveillance imposed on them by their society. While dominant cultural tropes demarcate the boundaries between masculine and feminine domains, these beliefs/intentions are also zones of constant struggle and contestation potentially reshaping and transforming social identities. Our findings build on a growing body of literature (e.g., Hunter, 2005; Langa, 2020; Ratele, 2015; Sideris, 2004; Smith, 2017) which explored critical opportunities for gender change and transformation of uncritical notions of masculinities.

5. Concluding remarks
In this paper, we have attempted to explore how young men may make sense of their masculinities and the possible implications of alternative masculinities. In the process, we highlight the patterns and trends of masculinities as embodied by these young men. In particular, we emphasize the impact of cultural norms and stereotypes on men’s behaviors and masculine practices, and the processes of imagining social change among men. A dominant thread that connects the narratives of our participants is the idea that social actors such as parents, teachers, and peers reinforce hegemonic masculine ideals in their everyday interactions. This process of masculinizing boys into men often encourage boys to adhere to cultural norms and stereotypes on masculinities. Such stereotypes conflate being a man with engaging in activities perceived as “hard stuff”. As a result of increasing pressure and surveillance from parents, teachers, and peers that censor, judge and evaluate the practices and deeds associated with boyhood, this process of making men out of boys allegedly compels and discourages boys from associating themselves with anything traditionally perceived to be “soft” and “private”. Dominant notions on masculine activity reveal how boys’ existences are strongly controlled and surveilled in accordance with dominant cultural norms and gender stereotypes. Similar to the findings of Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) and Helman and Kopano (2016), our findings suggest that to be perceived as a credible man is to be willing and committed to undertaking and performing particular set of practices in a given social context. As long as such practices position a person as “a man”, there is barely likely to be room for alternative imaginations on masculinities. In such a context, developing more equitable masculinities that respect diversities is likely to be compromised. This is more likely to be the case in rural and gender inequitable families compared to urban and more gender friendly families in northwestern Ghana as demonstrated by our findings.

Within dominant norms on masculinity, it is important to highlight potential difficulty that young men who may want to disrupt the patriarchal status quo are likely to face. The narratives of some of our participants seem to offer potential in imagining alternative masculine values and ideals within this cultural context. Such findings point to the currency of feminist parenting. Feminist parenting allows parents to teach their children how to embrace alternative, more fluid masculinities and femininities beyond rigid gender norms and cultural stereotypes. A few of our participants expressed the view that there is need to reflect on dominant notions of masculinity and femininity in ways that celebrate alternative values and gender discourses. Consistent with the argument of Flood (2011), Jewkes et al. (2015), and Mfecane (2008), there was an unequivocal suggestion that everyone (colloquially framed as “you and I”) should be concerned and interested in embracing feminist discourses. Such discourses treat things boys and men do as fairly equal and non-hierarchical as those things done by girls and women. Even though such narratives were less common compared to the more popular understanding and defining of masculinity (“things that define someone as a man and not a woman”), our findings invite scholars interested in critical understanding of the complexity and contradictory nature of
African realities to theorize and problematise masculinities and femininities beyond any predictable cluster of norms and ideals.

To theorize the everyday performances and displays of practices of masculinity within this cultural setting, it is highly important (theoretically and methodologically) to be sensitive to how unseen elements of personhood, especially those entangled in transmitting and propagating cultural credentials associated with manhood, play in shaping and mediating the kinds of human beings that young men may eventually become during adulthood.

In most African settings, including northwestern Ghana, it is commonly believed that people do not act or fail to act in their capacity as “independent” social actors (often using western liberal definition of social subjectivity, agency, and structure), but people are products of their social environments and their compositions and logic (Nyamnjoh, 2002). In the case of the present study, most young men are likely to become who they are culturally expected to become and not what and who they may personally wish to become because constructions and performances of masculinities are thoroughly embedded in pervasive cultural repertoires and messages, such as “a hunter trains his son how to hunt”. In attempting to imagine and foster ethics of progressive masculinities, we recommend that practitioners, ministries, activists, and policymakers should consider leveraging on the positive potentials inherent in pervasive cultural repertoires as critical entry points.

Cultural repertoires represent an important gateway through which knowledge on what it may mean to be a man is transferred from one generation to another. Pervasive cultural repertoires and messages have also pedagogical significance as children develop and internalize ideas around their positions in society. Since cultural repertoires play a greater influence on people’s behaviour and character, it is vitally important to begin to work with both young men and their social environments. Often times, intervention initiatives tend to work with young men in isolation from their cultural contexts, forgetting that the same young men will go back to societies that are not transformed. We suggest that any attempt seeking to transform men and their adherence to dominant masculine ideals must begin to transform the cultural spaces which men occupy as social subjects. Without empowering men to understand that adherence to less helpful versions of masculinities is harmful to men themselves, any attempt to transform such masculinities is likely to experience conflict, backlash, and resistance. Transforming harmful masculinities should be approached as a continue process which may eventually enable men to deconstruct often restrictive process of meaning-making around masculinities and femininities.

Studies in Africa have investigated and highlighted the complex ways in which young people may construct gender in conflicting ways (e.g., Bhana, 2005; Bhana, Nzimakwe, & Nzimakwe, 2011; Helman & Kopano, 2016; ; Langa, 2020; Pattman, 2005). These scholars have problematized the ways in which culturally acceptable constructions of gender, including masculinities and femininities tend to position men and women in unequal and hierarchical ways. Our analysis builds on and extends this body of literature by highlighting the multiple and opposing constructions of masculinity and femininity among young men in northwestern Ghana. While fundamentally inequitable in nature, young people’s notions and experiences of masculinities are shaped by several intersecting factors, including geography, culture, education, social class, etc. Our findings highlight that young men may construct masculinities and femininities in ways that reproduce harmful gender norms, relations, and power inequalities. Despite these problematic constructions of masculinity, the narratives of participants appear to offer some potential in imagining alternative masculine discourses which reject and resist hegemonic masculine ideals. Informed by such potential, we argue that a sincere appreciation of how young men may progress towards progressive masculine subjectivities ought to develop fuller understandings of the ambiguities, ambivalences, and conflicting appeals of multiple voices of masculinities. This is critical in developing an understanding of how and why gender transformation may be compromised or accepted among young men within the local context of northwestern Ghana.
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