Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa

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Chapter 9

Living on the edge

Young masculinity, poverty and sexual health

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> Senzo: …it is difficult to do something with an empty stomach, it is difficult, you can't afford to do every day while you are hungry.…you can't study while you are hungry, so you begin to fail and leave school and start looking for a job…

In the heart of a township settlement in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, a complex dynamic unfolds as 20-year-old Senzo reflects on food insecurity, unemployment, educational disengagement and financial deprivation. Within the crucible of everyday township life, Senzo and seven other black working-class young men aged 18–24 in this study grapple with their circumstances against a backdrop of poverty, crime, alcohol, sexual risk and violence against women, as they also aspire towards having loving relationships and gaining employment. The young men find themselves 'balancing on the edge of a knife' (Fast et al., 2020, p. 1) as they negotiate poverty, unemployment and sexuality. This juggling act, it is argued, arises from and shapes male power, thus serving as a significant arena for the expression of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity, following Connell (2005), can be viewed as a dominant version of masculinity within a socio-cultural setting where male power is exerted over women and 'other' men. While there has been critique against this understanding of power based on domination and subordination (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), hegemonic masculinity is a personal, collective and idealised cultural expression of manhood (Hearn & Morrell, 2012). Material and ideological domains contribute to male power (Connell, 2005), although they can also portray masculinity as a manifestation of weakness (Hunter, 2010). As observed by several scholars, when manhood is under threat, a sense of failure and weakness can produce complex expressions of masculinity and poor sexual health outcomes (Gibbs et al., 2020; Hunter, 2010; Ratele, 2022; Shefer et al., 2015). Commonly, dominant masculine norms are linked to sexual exploration, sexual prowess and conquest in heterosexual relationships but these norms are situational and are relationally produced (Hearn & Morrell, 2012). Under circumstances where male power is circumscribed, masculinity associated with sexual risk-taking (Fast et al., 2020), multiple and concurrent

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sexual partnerships (Shefer et al., 2015), unprotected sex (Duby et al., 2023), transactional sex (Closson et al., 2020) and sexual violence (Ratele, 2022) are common. Understanding how young men in poverty make sense of these variegated expressions of masculinity within their local settings is important given that their circumstances shape notions of manhood and impact their sexual health and well-being.

As young men transition into adulthood within precarious contexts, concerns have been raised about poor sexual health outcomes, especially when sex carries significance in the expression of hegemonic masculinity (Duby et al., 2023; Gibbs et al., 2020). The conditions under which masculinity is produced shapes young men's health outcomes. Sexual dominance and violence against women and girls are often linked to male weakness and vulnerability when other forms of power are limited. Thus, it is not possible to understand young men's sexual health outcomes without understand the context in which masculinity is produced. As Aggleton et al. (2014) assert, sexual health cannot be isolated from broader socio-cultural contexts but must be understood within the complex web of social forces that shape masculine conduct.

Drawing on an exploratory study based on interviews with eight young men, this chapter seeks to understand the paradoxical experiences of masculinity and the implications for sexual health, as young men make sense of poverty, unemployment and heterosexual relationship dynamics. Sexual health, as Aggleton et al. (2012) suggest, cannot be separated from the broader social, economic and cultural condition in which men live. In the context of this study, this highlights the interconnectedness between sexual health and various aspects of young men's lives, including their social and cultural norms and the everyday 'suffering' which characterises their lives. An approach to sexual health promotion that recognises the social determinants of sexual health requires adopting a broad-based response, which may work towards promoting healthier sexual outcomes for young men (Aggleton et al., 2012). Understanding the context of young men's lives as it weaves through other social structures (Connell, 2005) is vital if we are to respond to the need for healthier masculinities.

Young working-class black men like Senzo, living in abject poverty, are frequently pathologised as violent and hypersexual (Shefer & Hearn, 2022) and vectors in the spread of HIV (Closson et al. 2020; Duby et al., 2023). They are blamed and viewed as a problem (Bhana, 2018; Ratele, 2016; Shefer & Hearn, 2022). The consequence is that the expression of male power is commonly understood in public discourse as individual behaviour which is then racialised and classed. Herein, young black working-class men are seen as predators and dangerous instead of addressing the risks and harm that hegemonic versions of masculinity within the social setting mean for young men themselves. Moreover, when blame is accorded to young black men, racialised/classed discourses are mobilised and individual behaviour is targeted, glossing over the co-extensive forces that produce young men in conditions of vulnerability. This chapter resists simplistic characterisations that overlook the entanglement of

masculinities with social and economic conditions, young men's aspirations and desires for family, their capacity for love and what this means for sexual health.

Despite navigating social and economic fault lines of township life, the young men express aspirations for legitimate employment, envisioning roles such as gardening, car washing, bicycle shop employment, paramedic work, homeownership, plumbing and academic pursuits, even aspiring to become entrepreneurs. Amidst their yearnings for meaningful work, they aspire towards relationships grounded in love and family. As Izugbara and Egesa (2020, p. 1968) note of poor young men in Kenya, 'new positive visions of manliness are still possible' even among those who are at a heightened risk of embodying risky masculine practices. But as this chapter demonstrates, young men's aspirations are tempered by the harsh realities of poverty and unemployment, defined as a cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) where the materiality of everyday life, as Gibbs et al. (2020) also note, limits the potential for change and impacts on sexual health. Understanding young men in the township under conditions of ongoing struggle and addressing healthier masculinities necessitates a focus on masculinity as an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), one that combines the broader socio-economic constraints that limit young men's capacity to realise alternative modes of being and transformation with the experiences of everyday life in the township and allows us to understand the ways in which young men navigate the turbulent social and economic conditions and the effects on sexual health.

Poverty, masculinity and sexual health

In South Africa, Schotte (2019) makes three claims with regards to poverty: precarious employment is linked to poverty, family networks can either assist or impede economic advancement, and finally that pursuing further education facilitates upward social mobility. For the young men in this study who are unemployed and live in fragile households without higher education, finding stable employment is particularly difficult, undermining their capacity to survive. Statistics South Africa (2023) suggests that among the age cohort of 15–24 years, like the men in this study, unemployment rates have soared to a staggering 62.1% and this is exacerbated for working-class black South Africans. In KwaZulu-Natal province, data from Income and Expenditure Surveys and Living Conditions Surveys suggest that 47–48.4% of households live below the poverty line (Statistics South Africa, 2017, p. 86).

These statistics serve as the backdrop against which Senzo's story unfolds, illuminating the systemic challenges that confront him and other young men in this study. The intersecting forces of history, the legacies of apartheid, socio-economic and cultural conditions weave a complex narrative of poverty, food insecurity and troubled livelihoods. The corporeal experience of hunger is a tangible manifestation of race, class, history and structural inequalities embedded within the fabric of the township context, constraining Senzo's ability to

envision and pursue aspirational ideals and alternative pathways out of poverty. The dilapidated township setting, poverty, race and class reinforce structural violence and educational exclusion, and restrict entry to secure employment (Nussey, 2021).

In a country where traditional notions of masculinity often equate economic stability with provider status (Hearn & Morrell, 2012; Hunter, 2010; Langa, 2020; Mfecane, 2018; Ratele, 2016), Senzo finds himself constrained by the inability to secure food and gainful employment, which not only undermines his economic aspirations but also threatens masculinity to produce poor health outcomes. As economic hardships force young men into precarious living situations, the imperative to prioritise immediate survival often eclipses considerations of sexual health and well-being, making young men like Senzo particularly vulnerable to a myriad of sexual health risks, including multiple sexual partners, violence and unintended pregnancies. In many settings it has been observed that masculine norms shape health outcomes (Heilman & Barker, 2018). Norms of manhood that revolve around risk-taking, sexual prowess and stoicism, for instance, individually and collectively, encourage specific health behaviours that may be risky (Heise et al., 2019). For example, in Mozambique, Groes-Green (2009) shows how poverty and emasculation drive men's exertion of power over women through violence and hypersexuality and define masculinity through bodily power and presence. In many ways, Groes-Green's study confirms the work by Silberschmidt (2001) on violent masculinities in Kenya, underscoring the ways in which women's expanding economic roles have effects for men's sense of power and the way in which the body is used as a resource for men to engage with multi-partnered sexual relationships and sexually aggressive behaviour.

In South Africa, evidence suggests that township impoverished settings are also sites for high levels of gender violence where men are the main perpetrators of such violence (Gibbs et al., 2014). These settlements in South Africa also have a high burden of HIV and increase young people's propensity for sexual health risks (Gibbs et al., 2020). Expressions of masculinity are connected to the social and structural conditions that impact male conduct (Connell, 2005). Jewkes et al. (2023) observe that food insecurity creates conflict over resources when men cannot fulfil provider masculinity, leading to intimate partner violence. When masculinity cannot be achieved, young men are more prone to drug and alcohol use and multiple sexual partnerships (MacPherson et al., 2020), decreasing their use of condoms (Duby et al., 2023), participating in transactional sexual relations (Closson et al., 2020), substance use (Fast & Moyer, 2018) and perpetrating intimate partner violence (Gibbs et al., 2020; Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2024). In their study of Kenyan men in poverty, Izugbara (2015) suggests that while social and economic challenges weaken masculinity, men can and do aspire to engender social change. However, in their study of men in a township setting in South Africa, Gibbs et al. (2020, p. 515) report that social contexts play a central role in both producing and limiting potential for change and while some change is possible, the centrality

of the context is shaping masculinities means that change, 'may not be as transformative as those working for gender justice hope for.'

Study details

The study involved interviewing eight young black men aged between 18 and 24, all living in poverty within a township settlement in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This research adopts an exploratory approach aimed to explore the intersections of masculinity, socio-cultural context and economics among this demographic. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who were out of school and were between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age within the specified socio-economic background. I have been working for more than two decades with young men in school and I wanted to understand what happened to those in the context of poverty and unemployment after they left school. In school, young men dreamt of better lives (Bhana, 2018) but, as Jones (2023) in their study of schooling in Uganda illustrates, when hope is in tension with aspirations and dreams, disappointment can occur. While education is seen as a panacea to social and economic ills as well as health challenges, this may not be the case.

Recruitment efforts were facilitated through community networks and personal contacts. The data collection process involved a combination of focus group discussions and individual interviews. Initially, two focus group discussions were conducted to explore broad themes related to masculinity, poverty and socio-cultural dynamics within the township context. Following the focus group discussions, individual interviews were conducted with four participants who expressed willingness to participate further. These individual interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of personal experiences and perspectives. Since this was an exploratory study, the recruitment of participants was not challenging as the sample was small. Initially, I contacted the school where I had conducted research in the past, and once the first batch of participants was recruited for the focus group discussions, it facilitated further contacts within the community. The trust and rapport built during these initial interactions helped in expanding the participant pool for subsequent interviews. Focus group discussions and individual interviews took place within the community setting to ensure a familiar environment for participants. Each focus group comprised approximately 6–8 participants to facilitate discussions and ensure everyone had an opportunity to contribute. The length of focus group discussions varied but typically lasted around 60–90 minutes, depending on the depth of the conversation and participants' engagement. Individual interviews, on the other hand, were more flexible in duration, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes per participant. These individual sessions provided an opportunity for in-depth exploration of personal narratives and perspectives. The interviews were not conducted immediately after the focus group discussions. Instead, they were scheduled separately to allow for a more focused and private conversation with each participant. This approach ensured that participants felt

comfortable sharing their experiences and opinions without the influence of group dynamics.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data gathered from the interviews. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns, themes and meanings within the data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to masculinity, socio-economic challenges and cultural influences, considering the dynamic and fluid nature of masculinity as an assemblage interacting with social, cultural and economic contexts. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the use of pseudonyms is used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Additionally, ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It is important to acknowledge potential limitations of the study, including the small sample size and the specific geographical and cultural context of the participants.

Living on the edge: masculinity under threat

For young men living on the edge with no prospect of stable income and work, their lives reflect adversity not of their own making, reflecting the histories of inequalities and the legacies of apartheid which structure their daily lives. They emerge from contexts of structural dilapidation, precarious livelihoods and heightened risk levels to food insecurity where masculinity is under ongoing threat. They live in informal homes or shacks, usually made of zinc, plastic sheeting and other material which offers limited protection from the weather and flooding in KwaZulu-Natal region. The harshness of everyday life and economic adversity led 21-year-old Nzama to state that life was about 'suffering' as he expressed frustrations with the continuing material constraints, the lack of employment and food insecurity:

Nzama: So even if I have money now, I won't eat in the morning cos it's just something that I have grown up with…when you come to your house and look for food there will be no food…then you just cool it, watch television and you go to sleep…Or sometimes you go to a friend's house and ask for food…

Food insecurity marked the experience of all men in the study, reinforcing their hardship and marginalised position. Poverty was not new to them. Childhood poverty does impact future earnings and educational outcomes (Jewkes et al., 2023). The legacies of apartheid manifest in both the current turmoil experienced and the reflection on food insecurity during childhood. While traditional notions of masculinity associate manhood with economic success and the ability to provide for oneself and others, these young men experience a sense of emasculation. However, while poverty and the lack of employment foreclosed

opportunities, the young men also reflected on survival strategies. Phumlani talked about 'hustling,' mentioning that he would go to the scrapyard to 'sell bottles, sometimes cardboard.' Another form of earning an income was fishing:

Phumlani: Me and my friend here Sandile we used to go for fishing, and after we've done with the fishing we used to take the fishes and sell it to the Indians.

Shangase: Ja, they like, they like fish. So, we sell the fish to them. Ah, we even pick some fruit and sell it to them and then we get money…. So, we are not allowed to fish there…the security guards are guarding that area…we used to like hide while we fishing.

The act of fishing and selling fish and fruit to Indians indicates the interplay between race and class dynamics resulting from entrenched historical hierarchies within apartheid racial categorisations, which also intersect with class considerations. Selling fish and fruit was thus a means of economic survival but also their capacity to challenge the constraints imposed upon them, such as restricted access to fishing areas enforced by security guards. In the context of limited economic opportunities, they navigate material barriers, highlighting the connections between masculinity, labour and economic exchange within their community. As Ferguson (2015) notes, when structural inequalities limit economic opportunities for young men to access money through legitimate means such as formal employment, they also resort to informal economies, including informal work, street vending or participation in illicit activities, as a survival strategy. These material conditions shape the choices and opportunities available to young men, often constraining their ability to escape the cycle of poverty. In striving for the out-of-reach provider masculinity, the young men also spoke about gambling, theft and crime as integral to masculinity, shaping how they assert their roles within their social context:

Lindo: Sometimes, ya [yes], sometimes, sometimes people get killed during gambling in our community.

The prevalence of gambling activities within the township community highlights the socio-cultural significance of gambling as a means of economic survival within the community and the darker side to this activity. Poverty, unemployment and social inequality contribute to risk and crime and the production of masculinity:

Senzo: And the main thing that throws you into crime is poverty…. Theft, shoplifting…I used to go with my friends to town and do all those things and rob people…So I ended up in jail…It was about two months…Ya two months, and I am on parole… For now, I am not hungry. If I am hungry I will take your [researcher's] phone.

When masculinity is under threat, food insecurity, poverty and crime work in tandem to put pressure on young men like Senzo to find alternative means of accessing money. Engaging in activities such as theft, shoplifting and gambling can be viewed as attempts to reclaim a sense of power in the face of economic hardship and the desperation to alleviate hunger. Moreover, social activities and peer relations impact on harmful masculine norms, as Senzo points to being imprisoned. During the course of the interview, my cell phone on the table also became an object of desire in an environment marked by scarcity. My cell phone was used to record the interviews and during the interview Senzo points to the phone as a material object of desire. The result was that, I, as a researcher, held my cell phone closer to me whilst listening to his narrative. Senzo's narrative is complexly intertwined with the broader socio-economic context, where access to resources and opportunities is unevenly distributed. Phumlani too stated he 'used to steal clothes,' from the line in the community to earn a living but also to buy drugs and alcohol.

Dube stated that in 'each and every corner there are people drinking.' The widespread use of alcohol is a risk factor for intimate partner violence (Gibbs et al., 2020). Within the broader context of precarity, young men may also feel pressure to conform to these gender norms as a way to assert their masculinity. Where access to resources and opportunities is limited, alcohol may enhance masculinity and social status while also providing a temporary relief from the stressors and hardships of daily life.

Phumlani: The other thing that makes us drink…we pass our matric [grade 12] and we think life couldn't be better if we passed our matric and we are still sitting in the same community. The government says there are big money they put on education and there is a lot of employment that will take place, but we don't see that. The other people who are still in school, they say how, they are finished their matric, but they are still like us they don't do anything. They don't work, they don't study to university, so like me, when I finished my matric … even now, my bank account is empty, I am not working at all, but I finished my matric.

Evident here is the connection between alcohol use and the disillusionment and frustration between passing matric (high school graduation), government promises and the reality of their lived experiences. Passing matric is often portrayed as a gateway to better opportunities and socioeconomic mobility. However, for young men in this community, achieving this milestone does not necessarily translate into tangible improvements in their lives. This disjuncture between education, job opportunities and lived reality generates feelings of emasculation, as young men grapple with the inability to fulfil culturally prescribed roles and expectations. An assemblage of socio-economic factors, institutional policies, cultural norms, and individual experiences shapes their

perceptions and lived experiences. The assemblage includes elements such as government promises of investment in education, structural barriers to economic opportunities, and the personal experiences of unemployment and financial insecurity. The absence of tangible resources and economic security limits Phumlani's capacity to navigate social structures and exert control over his own life trajectory, highlighting the material dimensions of power and inequality within their community.

Lindo talked about having part-time work as a 'bar tender.' He said he 'couldn't control myself, I used to drink at work… and I got fired. I have to live with debts, because I don't work. I have to drink every day if possible.' Alcohol, as a material substance, not only alters behavioural responses but also exacerbates existing socio-economic challenges within the community. Lindo's observation that 'if you are drunk, you do all the wrong things' highlights the power of alcohol in shaping masculinity, often leading to negative outcomes. Lindo also spoke of the frequent conflicts between his parents growing up over financial strain, alcohol use and domestic violence.

Masculinity, poverty and sexual dynamics in township life

Living on the edge has effects for the ways in which heterosexual expressions of masculinity are produced. In a context where masculinity is weakened, the expression of heterosexuality emerges as another avenue of power. As noted by several scholars, having multiple sexual partners and sexual entitlement are part of men's strategies to gain power (Hunter, 2010; Silberschmidt, 2001). All the young men felt the pressure to conform to traditional masculine ideals, particularly the importance of heterosexual relationships as a marker of status and power.

Sexual entitlement and risk

Senzo stated that 'a man without a girlfriend is nothing but a coward, and a loser,' reflecting the socio-cultural expectation that men should assert dominance through sexual relationships. This was also evident when Sandile brought up the question of masturbation:

Sandile: What? Masturbation? It means you are weak, you can't talk a girl, you can't convince a girl. You can't convince a girl!

Here there is an emphasis on sexual prowess as a measure of masculinity, with masturbation seen as a sign of weakness and inability to attract a partner. This reinforces the notion that men must prove their masculinity both at an individual and collective level through sexual conquests and assertive behaviour towards women whilst reinforcing female objectification. With regards to sexual health and condom use, the spontaneity of sexual activity and the unavailability of condoms increases sexual health risks:

Shezi: That thing [penis] comes up… If there are no condoms, what you gonna do? You gonna let the girl go? No, you won't.

Normative understandings of masculinity shape the expressions of heterosexual prowess. In this context, Shezi highlights the pressure to conform to traditional masculine ideals, such as demonstrating control over sexual encounters. Shezi's assertion that, 'If there are no condoms, what you gonna do?' reflects a sense of entitlement to engage in sexual activity despite the lack of protection, emphasising the importance of sexual conquest and the fear of losing face or appearing weak if they refuse. Gendered norms and the expectations surrounding heterosexual masculinity within the township context collectively contribute to the formation of gendered subjectivities, as immediate pleasure is prioritised over long-term health.

Senzo: She sleeps around just in order to get money to get food, then she gets HIV and AIDS and get pregnant, and then they can become prostitute and stuff like that. Because if she is hungry she will come by my house, then I will take an advantage of that, that she is hungry, I have to give her some food, while I give her some food she knows what has to be done after that. She eats and then we sleep. At first you know her background, that she is coming from a poor family… She will say, 'Senzo listen, I am hungry, I can do anything to get food…Only food, or money to buy food.'

Senzo embodies masculine traits associated with dominance and control. He describes leveraging hunger and food insecurity as a means to assert sexual dominance. Masculinity, as described above, can intersect with men's better economic standing in relation to women in the township to perpetuate exploitation. While Senzo has been able to hustle and earn some income, in relation to poorer women he is able to express power. Nzama expressed frustration as he narrated his experience with his girlfriend who cheated on him with a man possessing a 'car.' In this context, the materiality of sexuality and the threats men faced in relation to other men with better economic power was evident. Masculinity, material conditions, food insecurity and gender power dynamics shape sexual conduct of young black men in poverty. Masculine norms are associated with adverse sexual health outcomes and in the context of this study risky sexual conduct can also increase the spread of HIV which has implications for young men's lives and the lives of women (Closson et al., 2020).

Ben 10 and the working girls

The young men spoke about assuming the role of Ben 10, which in South Africa denotes engaging in a relationship with an older, financially supportive woman, known as a 'sugar mummy.' The collapse in the formal wage sector and young men's precarious and troubled livelihoods places men in vulnerable

economic positions, including in relation to women. In this context, the Ben 10 emerged as a strategic manoeuvre for young men as they directed attention to older women. These women held jobs, albeit not high-paying ones such as cashiers or waitresses, but were still financially better off than the men. They also referred to themselves as 'gold diggers' and 'treasure hunters,' highlighting how poverty and masculinity shaped their approach to sexuality.

Dube:	I involve myself with working people.
Researcher:	Working girls?
Dube:	She who is giving money to eat. I have to go for a person who going to support me. [*Others say*, yes] with everything I need.
Researcher:	Like what do you need?
Dube:	I have nothing, and she does, I'm going to get, she will do something for me. In other words, for me to be happy. You know…treasure hunter
Lindo:	Gold digger.
Shangase:	Ben 10. Ja. Ja.
Researcher:	What's Ben 10?
Shangase:	Ben 10 is like, the idea comes from suffering. If you suffer you have to go to working girls.
Researcher:	What kind of suffering?
Shangase:	That you don't have money to, to…to buy clothes. You don't have money to go and have a party because you like party.
Dube:	Older people pay… Most of my girlfriends are waitresses.

Food insecurity and lack of access to clothes incite strategic manoeuvring as young men negotiate sexual relationships. The Ben 10 emerges from a narrative of hardship and 'suffering,' where lack of financial means directs these men towards relationships with older, working women. This challenges traditional notions of masculinity, contradicting the emphasis men placed on breadwinning status. Instead, these men seek financial support from women, positioning themselves in a dependent role, albeit as strategic 'treasure hunters,' illustrating the entanglement of economic marginalisation with gender dynamics and material conditions, shaping young men's relationship dynamics.

'I really wanna have one girl, I really want to show her love, and be true to her'

The context of young men's troubled lives, defined by material deprivation and loss of masculine power, does not preclude the possibility for them to imagine other forms of masculinity (Gibbs et al., 2020). These conceptions of masculinity are the effects of the complex entanglement of affective, material, social and cultural forces through which alternative possibilities are discussed. One way in which men were able to imagine new ways of becoming men and proving masculinity was through aspiring towards better lives based on loving relationships and future-oriented ideals of marriage, families and children.

In doing so, they dismantle the uniform positioning of working-class black men as inherently violent and pathological. As Shefer and Ratele (2023), Langa (2020) and others (Mfecane, 2018) have suggested, even in the context of vulnerability, masculinity is not stable. It is this ambivalence and fluidity around masculinity that provides possibilities for alternative forms of masculinities underscored by gender-equitable practices, non-violence and health-enhancing conduct (Gibbs et al., 2020; Zweig, 2021).

Senzo: Er… to have a girlfriend is something it's, it is enjoyable. Ja, to have someone that you love, and show me that she loves you too. It's something good.

Despite the earlier descriptions of aggressive masculinity based on heterosexual domination, the young men desire better futures for themselves and they do so by highlighting loving relationships as they transgress dominant narratives based on a narrow conceptualisation of working-class black masculinity as criminal and deviant. These changing narratives have much scope for better sexual health outcomes:

Shezi: Love is, love is happiness cos when you…are sitting with someone you love, there is that enjoyment going on.

Whilst men do often support and engage in hegemonic versions of masculinity, the fragility of masculinity means that men are more than simply an expression of violence and control and the desire for love and happiness demonstrates the multiple and fluid ways through which young men negotiate their troubled livelihoods. By loving, and aspiring to and nurturing emotional connections and interdependence, men can also change and advance gender equitable relationships (Elliott, 2016), which is key to sexual well-being.

Providing material well-being and gifts is key to the expressions of love and entangled with provider masculinity:

Dube: …in order to, for you to be proud of your woman you have to like, buy her expensive like necklace, earrings, do her hair, buy expensive clothes, shoes and stuff. To make sure she is always happy.

In contemporary South African townships, provider masculinity has evolved to be closely associated with disposable income and consumption (Gibbs et al., 2020). Men express their masculinity through the giving of gifts or money in exchange for love and sex, reflecting a shift towards a more consumerist-driven understanding of masculinity and romance. Thus, Dube's narrative about love and gifts must be viewed through this gendered gift exchange culture. Hunter (2010) discusses how provider masculinity has its roots in historical practices and emerged alongside the customary practice of *ilobolo* (bridewealth), where marriages were arranged through the exchange of cattle and other material

goods from the bridegroom to the bride's family. This practice established a gendered and cultural privilege for men, wherein they were expected to provide for their households and invest in the payment of bride wealth. Historically, in the early twentieth century, men in rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal demonstrated provider masculinity by establishing homesteads, leading households, and fulfilling their economic obligations in marriage arrangements. This system of male power was deeply ingrained and perpetuated through the circulation of resources within the community.

Provider love also has implications for power within the relationship and the expectation of sex. In a context where provider love (Hunter, 2010) places pressure on men to demonstrate their love through material means, this expectation can create a paradox for unemployed men who lack the financial means to fulfil these expectations, potentially leading to emasculation, but can also fuel unequal gender power dynamics and sexual risk. However, other scholars suggest that providing love should not be placed in a binary between emotional attachment and material provision (Nasser El-Dine, 2018). Love, nurturing and providing materially suggest that masculinity is not solely defined by economic prowess but can also encompass caregiving and emotional support. Hunter (2010) discusses how provider love is often associated with transactional forms of care, where the distinction between instrumental actions and emotional connections within intimate relationships can blur. While provider masculinity may dictate the need for material gifts or financial support in relationships, the fluidity and complexity of masculinity could encompass both caregiving and emotional nurturing. By recognising the importance of material forms of caring in romantic relationships, a more nuanced understanding of masculinities in the context of poverty can emerge, highlighting both the material and emotional dimensions of love and care as elucidated marriage ideals.

The lack of a stable family environments in young men's lives meant that their ideals around romance, marriage and family ideals of young men were intensified:

Sandile: …I want to er, to, to, to raise up children, to build a warm and comfortable family and house.

Lindo: Protect my family, love my family…cos uhm my mother and my father didn't get to get married now I want uhm I want to do something different…I have respect. I am what I am today because of a single woman who raised me so I respect and love women. I really wanna have one girl and er I really want to show her love, and be true to her and honest to her and do good things for her.

The young men invested in romantic ideals and placed significant emphasis on the institution of marriage and family, indicating the desire for stability and emotional fulfilment. Lindo states that unlike his own upbringing he would like to 'get married,' articulating aspirations towards creating warm, comfortable

homes and raising children in loving environments, which counters the narrative of inherent violence. Pyke (2020) suggests that in many South African townships gendered respectability is associated with cultural modes of masculinity. Following Lindo, these modes of masculinity are based on the need to protect family, which is also underlined by the insecurity that stemmed from his own troubled childhood.

Men like Sandile and Lindo, who grow up without fathers, are not uncommon in South Africa (Langa, 2020). Lindo identifies his mother as playing a significant role in shaping masculinity underscored by respect and a positive attitude towards women, providing new possibilities for nurturing respect for self and women. Other research suggests, however, that female caregivers play an ambivalent role in young men's lives providing both care and reinforcing hegemonic masculine practices (Hunter, 2010; Zweig, 2022).

It must be noted here that Lindo talks of respect (*ukuhlonipha*), marriage and family in ways that are inflected by Zulu traditional norms and community values, and of the importance of *ubuntu* (interdependence and humanity to others) shaping masculinity that values honour, responsibility and commitment (Mkhize, 2004, 2006). Ukuhlonipha is a form of respectful behaviour which is highly gendered and a widespread cultural norm in southern Africa (Rudwick & Posel, 2014). While women are expected to present a chaste disposition, men are not excluded from these cultural practices wherein respect for elders, including older men and women, fulfilling provider status, securing stability as head of the household and marriage are historically rooted (Hunter, 2010). Apartheid, colonialism and labour migration disrupted rural life in South Africa, producing vulnerabilities in relation to the economic sphere and men's inability to marry, threatening masculinity.

In this regard, Lindo resuscitates idealised notions of Zulu masculinity based on marriage, family and children, broadly conceived as ukuhlonipha (respect) and is key to 'doing and being Zulu' (Irvine & Gunner, 2018). Love and respect for women demonstrates a desire to uphold positive familial and cultural values, challenging the notion of young black men as solely antisocial or dangerous. Indeed, aspirations towards marriage and family life are key to caring actions and integral to understandings of love and stability. This focus on family debunks the image often portrayed of young men satisfying narrow self-interests and contradicts the stereotype of young black men as indifferent or incapable of forming intimate connections. At the same time, these aspirations are also situated in the context of ilobolo. While Lindo and others desired marriage as an aspirational ideal, this was also based on the ability to pay lobola and 'protect' their families. Love, then, jostles with the surrounding socio-economic and cultural context and reverberates with ideals around gender, culture and masculinity. When men cannot pay for lobola and cannot fulfil the ideals around romance and love, masculinity is placed under threat. While young men's imaginaries point to love, hope and aspirations for better lives, joblessness and poverty can reproduce a sense of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011).

Phumlani: …sometimes you see a marriage now is like a business, between the two families. I don't see spending my money on someone who don't love me… So, if you married, after, after a month maybe you…break up then she will take all the money.

Dube: What can they do? Nothing. They have to obey. They have to obey. They cry. They cry and sleep. They can't go back to their families, its personal. Personal. He paid the *lobola* and married her so ey, if so if the girl want to go back to her family he have to take, ey he has to take all twelve cows he give her and give them back.

In the above example, Phumlani talks about scepticism towards marriage and the negotiation of lobola being portrayed as a mere business transaction. Instead, he reflects a desire for reciprocal love and commitment. This perspective challenges the notion of young black men as callous sexual predators as Phumlani asserts their desire for emotional connections. At the same time, the payment of lobola in the context of poverty, as a business transaction, reflects the ways in which masculinity, socio-economic constraints and cultural norms are interwoven. Phumlani's concern about the financial implications of marriage breakdowns, particularly regarding the potential loss of lobola payments, underscores broader anxieties about economic instability and the power dynamics within relationships. This concern reflects an assessment of young men's vulnerability to economic pressures, as they fear investing resources without assurance of reciprocated affection or commitment. In the event of a breakdown in marriage, lobola payments are lost. These concerns about love and marriage highlight the complexities of navigating masculinity, poverty and cultural expectations within a broader social context shaped by historical legacies and contemporary challenges.

However, the dynamics of love are multifaceted. Dube reinforces traditional views of masculinity centred around female subjugation, which contradicts Phumlani's apprehensions regarding lobola payment and marital dissolution. Instead, Dube emphasises male dominance, advocating for female submission and asserting men's entitlement to reclaim the lobola payment (12 cows) in case of marriage breakdown. Consequently, Dube suggests that women endure abusive relationships due to concerns over the consequences of the lobola payment.

The gender power dynamics in notions of love were also evident as Nzama talked about his girlfriend, who cheated on him. He said, 'she cheated, and then I gave her a hiding. strong hiding.' As he talked about slapping and kicking his girlfriend, he also said that he took her back because he 'loved' her. The contradiction between love and violence suggests the ways in which men are emasculated when betrayed, but this is especially exacerbated in the context of economic hardship, which intensifies feelings of insecurity and powerlessness, particularly for men like Nzama, who may perceive their masculinity as being challenged.

By focusing on love, respect and aspirations for meaningful relationships and family life, we can challenge and deconstruct the stereotypes that diminish the humanity and complexity of young black working-class South African men. At the same time, we can understand better the ways in which their desires and love ideals are contradictory, as they both support and challenge masculinity in its ongoing jostling with the surrounding socio-material context.

Conclusion

The chapter addresses the complex relationship between poverty, masculinity and sexual health among young men aged 18–24 in black working-class township contexts in South Africa. Through an exploration of their challenges and experiences, the findings have implications for sexual health and overall well-being.

First, young men are confronted with masculine weakness in the face of poverty. Economic instability and the inability to fulfil traditional provider roles can erode self-worth and their capacity to fulfil their aspirations towards a better life produce masculinities that 'hustle' through gambling, crime and theft, and where alcohol use is mediated against everyday precarity. Second, a strong association exists between the notion of hustling masculinities and expressions of heterosexual entitlement and risk-taking behaviour. Within this context, men who lack romantic partners are often stigmatised as 'losers,' while those who engage in masturbation are othered as failing to meet masculine expectations of heterosexual prowess. Masculine entitlement manifests in a readiness to engage in heterosexual encounters, even in situations where protective measures such as condom usage are unavailable, all in pursuit of reinforcing traditional masculine ideals. The Ben 10 relationships, wherein young men engage in relationships with older women for financial gain, have clear sexual health risks. Finally, aspirations for love, family stability, work and marriage are deeply intertwined with notions of masculinity and cultural expectations. Despite facing material deprivation, the young men express a desire for meaningful relationships and traditional family structures, challenging dominant narratives of masculinity associated with violence and recklessness.

In addressing these complex issues, a comprehensive approach that considers the intersecting factors of poverty, masculinity and cultural context is necessary. Interventions must go beyond traditional sexual health promotion strategies to address systemic inequalities and provide resources and support to work with young men to make healthier choices. In conclusion, addressing young men in the context of unemployment and poverty will require looking beyond questions of pathology to the social, structural, economic and cultural conditions that shape how masculinity is produced and which reinforce vulnerability, but also considering how the same conditions open possibilities for tenderness and love. With regards to the latter, this study and those of others (Izugbara & Egesa, 2020; Zweig, 2022) reveal that even in the context of poverty, young men aspire towards loving relationships, family stability and the

desire to have a home. Their imaginations and desired futures open up possibilities to change masculinities. However, these desires are contradictorily situated within hegemonic notions of provider masculinity. Healthy masculinities must be embedded within an agenda where men can understand their power, vulnerabilities and overall privilege. There is also a need to challenge and reassess what masculinity might look like for men in the abyss of economic inequalities while addressing structural distress and economic support in order to make progress towards gender equality and sexual well-being.

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