# Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa

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# Chapter 1

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# 1 Young masculinities and sexual health

## Perspectives from Southern Africa

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We write this book on the 30th anniversary of the 1994 Cairo Programme of Action.[1] A long-standing goal of the Programme of Action remains relevant today as it was in 1994, where working with men and boys was highlighted as vital for improving sexual health and well-being of both men and women. Over the last 30 years, scholarship across the globe has increasingly emphasised the need for men's involvement in family life – caring for children, responsible fatherhood – as well as the need to focus on sexual health (Aggleton et al., 2012; Gottzén et al., 2020; Kimmel et al., 2004; Messerschmidt, 2015). Following the World Health Organisation (2015), sexual health is conceptualised as a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It involves a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships. Sexual health includes the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences that are free of coercion, discrimination and violence, underlined by sexual rights, including the right to access sexual health services. Underlying many of the discussions, debates and programmes to involve boys and men is the need to ensure a state of sexual well-being that is pleasurable, violence-free and one that promotes respectful relationships (Vandello et al., 2024). Enhancing sexual health among young men requires understanding, addressing and changing masculinities, creating caring possibilities and equitable gender relations. Changing masculinities is deemed to be a move away from the trouble that men and boys create for their own health and the health of women and girls. A focus on men, sexuality and health is thus key to transforming gender relations and creating better health outcomes for all.

Internationally, the field of critical studies on men and masculinities is currently engaged in dynamic debates including, among others, how masculinities are constructed and experienced, how and to what extent are understandings and representations of masculinities changing and the implications for sexual health (Griffith et al., 2019; Ragonese & Barker, 2019; Vandello et al., 2024). This emphasis is particularly relevant considering that men's adverse sexual health outcomes are entangled with understandings of masculinity and the social-structural frameworks through which their lives and relationships are produced. Scholarship is increasingly emphasising the need to work with

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young men and address harmful masculinities, gender norms and the unequal relations of power which complicate sexual health outcomes for men as well as women and children (Bhana et al., 2023; Rhead et al., 2019; Shefer & Ratele, 2023). This is particularly evident in men's use of violence against women and children, their power in controlling sexual and reproductive decisions, their lack of, or continued avoidance of, child care and nurturing and the effects of these patterns of conduct on families and women's work. Unhealthy masculine conduct promoting gender ideologies around sexual risk, strength, not seeking help, entitlements and the disparagement of the female and femininity put men's health at risk. Moreover, physical power, autonomy, the validation of multiple sexual partners and emotional disconnection increase vulnerability to risk and unhealthy sexual outcomes. These masculine norms increase male propensity to engage in violence, homicides, drug and alcohol use and risky sexual behaviours, as well as to avoid health care treatment for disease, including HIV. The need to engage with men and boys in ways that challenge repressive and harmful masculinities is now well established in the scholarship for improving sexual health for men and women, although how to intervene remains problematic (Brennan-Wilson et al., 2024; Jewkes et al., 2015).

In this book, we focus on young men in Southern Africa. In this region, concerns remain about the assemblage of violence, poverty and emasculation in the context of race, class and structural inequalities that coalesce to produce brittle and vulnerable masculinities. In this crucible, gender and cultural norms continue to uphold male power and privilege, affecting intimacy and male power over women's sexual and reproductive health. Southern Africa also remains a region heavily affected by HIV transmission, and addressing the gendered disparities in disease is crucial for effective prevention and control strategies. In the context of young men's poor sexual health outcomes and the problems created for others, addressing masculinity has become extremely significant in this region. In turn, hegemonic versions of masculinity continue to revolve around 'real' manhood underlined by taking risks, homophobia and transphobia, sexual entitlement, and expressions of dominance over women and other men. Against this backcloth, we are interested in the complexities of young masculinities and their implications for sexual health and well-being. Through an analysis of young men in Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe we show how cultural, social and gendered expectations shape their experiences as they navigate their everyday sexual lives.

Ever since masculinity scholarship emerged in Southern Africa (Moodie, 1988), the field has undergone a significant transformation, expanding to encompass diverse theoretical frameworks and methodologies while reflecting a broader understanding of masculinity in relation to histories of colonialism, apartheid in South Africa and the intimate connection with capitalism. Alongside these constraints on changing masculinities are broader goals around gender justice and sexual health. Key moments in the literature, following Shefer and Ratele (2023), include the pivotal works of Morrell (1998, 2001),

Richter and Morrell (2005), Shefer et al. (2007), Ratele (2016, 2022), Mfecane (2018) and Langa (2020). From what began as an examination of the intersections of masculinity with issues such as HIV, gender violence and socio-economic challenges, a more nuanced understanding emerged, shifting from focusing solely on women and girls to include men and masculinities and acknowledging their part in both perpetuating and challenging harmful gender norms. Recent publications, such as the *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (Gottzén et al., 2020) reflect the ongoing relevance of these discussions. They emphasise the need to consider the lived experiences of young men in the context of postcolonial and post-apartheid realities, where complexities of race, class and identity significantly shape masculinities.

Following Connell (2005) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), Southern African scholarship has brought attention to the ways in which masculinities are produced as a place in gender relations and the ways in which men and women engage with relations of power (Connell, 2005; Morrell, 2001). Masculinities are not static. As Connell (2005) notes, masculinities are multiple and changing, although hegemonic versions of masculinity serve to entrench relations of domination, control and subordination over women and minority groups of men including black working-class men as well as queer sexualities. While hegemonic masculinity as a concept has been widely used and redefined (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) notes, hegemonic masculinity is an exalted form of masculinity, culturally idealised and compellingly heterosexual (Anderson, 2009). Of significance is the understanding that masculinities are situational and the broader socio-cultural circumstances and economic conditions have effects on the ways in which masculinity is produced. However, in much of Southern Africa, ideas about masculinity and black African masculinity continue to cohere around violence and danger. In fact, black African men are uniformly positioned as rough and reckless while reproducing racialised tropes that vilify black working-class African men.

Troubled by the reliance on Northern theories of masculinity, Mfecane (2020) notes that while understandings of masculinity in the region have advanced scholarship in the field, there remain concerns about the local conceptualisation of masculinity. As Mfecane (2020, p. 4) notes:

> Theorising masculinities locally has the potential to strengthen South African scholarship on men and masculinities, and also enhance its appeal to African men – and women – as it is likely to be perceived as embodying their value systems… I suggest that this process of theorising masculinities locally should make use of popular concepts and idioms that form part of everyday life in African societies and give meaning and direction to social action.

In this book, we examine how young masculinities and sexual health intersect with local realities in Southern Africa, a region where cultural values, economic constraints and historical legacies of gender inequality complicate

efforts to engage young men in sexual health interventions and well-being. We argue that understanding young men's health requires attending to the particular risks and vulnerabilities they face – which are compounded by social and cultural expectations of masculinity, which often demand displays of dominance, sexual prowess and emotional stoicism. Yet, within these challenges lie opportunities for intervention. Alongside the work of Aggleton et al. (2024, p. 1), the book seeks to offer 'hope for continuing progress – albeit it in troubled times – towards health and well-being, justice and recognition for all, regardless of gender, sex or sexuality.' By engaging with young men and masculinities and centring their everyday lives, this book highlights the critical need for comprehensive, context-specific approaches that not only address risks but also build pathways to more equitable and healthier futures that can appeal to men (and women) in the region through allegiance to local specificities and global realities.

In Southern Africa, advancements have been made in acknowledging the critical role of engaging men and boys in addressing harmful masculinities, particularly within sexual and reproductive health initiatives. At the same time, especially in South Africa, there has been a growing advocacy for the recognition of men's sexual health and its complicated links with masculinity (Brennan-Wilson et al., 2024; Ragonese & Barker, 2019). There is a need for changing masculinities, creating possibilities for caring, achieving equitable gender relations, and fostering female agency as a move away from the trouble that men and boys create for their own health and the health of others. Scholarship has drawn attention to the gaps in our knowledge of the role of masculinity in both constraining and enabling health-promoting behaviours, including the important role that men can play in the prevention of gender violence, creating healthy families, fostering better social connectedness, including preventing risky sexual conduct and hypersexualised masculinities. Despite these developments, considerable gaps remain in how to engage men and boys, the mechanisms through which these interventions operate and the extent to which they challenge entrenched gender power inequalities and harmful masculinities. Further research is necessary to elucidate how young masculinities and sexual health are entangled and to refine interventions aimed at fostering gender equity (Dworkin et al., 2015). There remain significant gaps in our knowledge about new possibilities and the changing form and nature of masculinity. A focus on young men is not sufficiently addressed in the literature in Southern Africa.

As editors, we have come together because of our joint interest in masculinities, young people and sexual health in the region (Bhana et al., 2023; Govender & Poku, 2020; Skovdal et al., 2011). We recognised that a significant gap in the literature was a consideration of young men in the Southern African region. When we first came together to develop the ideas around which this book revolves, we had a sense of 'young'. In theorising the concept of 'young men', we must acknowledge the fluidity and complexity inherent in defining youth, particularly in the context of gendered experiences. The struggle to define

'young men' is reflective of broader tensions in defining youth itself. The United Nations (2015) defines youth as individuals aged 15–24, yet this numerical range may not fully capture the social, cultural and developmental realities of young manhood. Similarly, biological age may not suffice as the sole criterion for understanding young men, as maturity, gender performance and social responsibilities intersect with age in various ways. For instance, young men at ten may be negotiating early masculinities, while those in their twenties may be navigating adulthood while still grappling with masculine ideals. The term 'young' carries different meanings depending on the critical life stage being examined, especially in relation to the exploration of masculinity, sexuality and associated risks, which can differ significantly from experiences of masculinity later in life (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The period of 'trying out' masculinity during young adulthood is often marked by heightened vulnerability to social pressures, norms and cultural contexts, including risk-taking behaviours linked to gender performance. This contrasts with older male adulthood, where different masculine norms may dominate (Vandello et al., 2024). Given these nuances, we allowed contributors to determine their own framing of 'young men', recognising that youthfulness cannot be predetermined but is contextually defined and fluid. As age alone cannot encapsulate the developmental, emotional and social dimensions of young manhood, we have adopted a flexible and inclusive approach when discussing these concepts in the book. However, what the chapters share is analytical attention to the social practices of 'being young' and negotiating masculine identities as the boys and young men vacillate between childhood, youth and adulthood.

Moreover, as editors we are fully aware that the scholarly landscape in the Southern African region remains significantly biased towards South Africa, and we note the disproportionate influence on knowledge production in the broader regional context. In this book, it is clear that South African scholarship is overrepresented. While research in neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe is gaining traction, the need for a more diverse and robust body of work emanating from other regions within Southern Africa remains pressing. This is particularly important for expanding the intellectual cohort engaging with gender and critical masculinity studies. In fact, we take heed of theorising masculinities locally (Mfecane, 2020) and broadening the epistemological base beyond the predominant influence of Northern scholars without letting go of the complex knowledge production on a global level (Connell, 2005). As such, the book offers more nuanced understandings of young masculinities and sexual health, which are informed by the lived realities of young men across diverse local contexts (Morrell et al., 2012; Ratele, 2016). Such an expansion is critical for creating more contextually relevant theories of masculinity that reflect the unique socio-economic, cultural and political landscapes of the region.

Through the various chapters and perspectives of young men themselves, this book expands our understandings of the complexities of navigating sexual

health as a young man in Southern Africa today. We seek to explore how they can be positioned not as barriers to change but as agents of transformation in the broader struggle for sexual health and gender justice. It is not just about reducing risks. By working with young men, who are poised, together with young women, as central drivers of Africa's future, there is the potential to create positive shifts in gender norms. Encouraging men to be more caring partners, fathers and community members fosters an environment where respect, communication and shared responsibility thrive. The potential for young men to adopt these values is particularly high.

In this book, we are particularly interested in the ways in which young masculinities are being forged, challenged and accommodated within diverse social settings in Southern Africa, and what this means for young men's sexual health, and for more equitable gender relations. The chapters provide a long-overdue consideration of the contemporary social and structural conditions that shape young masculinities, whether they relate to urbanisation and poverty, expanding access to the internet, smartphones and social media or the economic empowerment of women. The chapters provide a historical snapshot of changes, resistances and new possibilities while consolidating the research and debates around young men and sexuality and providing implications for theory, current research, policy and practice. The book is structured around key issues, including:

- Love, pleasure and romance
- Social norms, masculinity and health
- Masculinity and sexual risk
- Masculinity and HIV

While we have organised the chapters within these distinct themes, it is important to note that there are significant overlaps between them. The complexity of young men's experiences with sexuality, masculinity and health does not easily fall into rigid categories. Rather, these themes intersect and influence one another, with issues of love and pleasure often entangled with social norms, risk-taking behaviours and the ongoing challenges posed by HIV. As you engage with the chapters, you will find that many of the discussions on masculinity and sexual health recur across sections, reflecting the interconnectedness of these themes in the lives of young men in Southern Africa. This overlapping approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the multiple dimensions of young men's experiences and the ways in which their identities and behaviours are shaped by the broader socio-cultural context. We bring together a collection of chapters by scholars, most of whom are based in and working in the region, to analyse what a focus on young men, masculinities and sexual health means for theory, policy and practice. The chapters show how the study of young masculinities and sexual health in Southern Africa reflects broader global trends while also addressing local realities. As this field continues to develop, it holds the promise of fostering deeper understanding and meaningful change in the dynamics of gender and sexual health in the region.

**Love, pleasure and romance**

This section explores the dominant norms surrounding heterosexuality and how young men navigate the affective dimensions of sexual life. While much of the existing literature addresses sexual risk, the contributions here offer new insights into the dynamics of love, desire and heterosexuality, and how these shape relationships and configurations of power. Additionally, the authors examine young men's engagement with sexual consent and their capacity to love, care and reflect on romantic rejection. These insights suggest possibilities for strength-based, sex-positive, gender-transformative interventions.

We begin the investigation into young masculinities and love with the chapter, 'Love, masculinity and alternative pathways to sexual health'. Here Moshibudi Motimele, Malose Langa, Darrian Long and Katlego Morare contest the existing research on young black masculinities in South Africa where dominant frameworks have often portrayed black men through the lenses of deficiency, criminality and disease, with a strong focus on their involvement in violent masculinities, gender inequality and poor sexual health outcomes (Barker et al., 2007). This chapter seeks to move beyond such reductive portrayals by exploring how young black men in South Africa are actively redefining their masculinities, particularly through their engagement with love and alternative pathways to sexual health. The study draws on individual and focus group interviews with 26 young black men, aged 15–24 years, from two distinct townships in Gauteng – Alexandra and Vosloorus. The young men discuss the importance of honesty, mutual care and communication in building healthy sexual relationships, challenging male-dominant sexual scripts that privilege control and conquest. Radical honesty emerges as a central theme, with participants advocating for relationships grounded in respect, equality and emotional transparency. The chapter also highlights the role of close friendships (*abangani* or *bakgwera*) as crucial support systems that allow young black men to express vulnerability without fear of judgement. In conclusion, the chapter argues that young black men in these communities are actively reshaping the narratives surrounding masculinity by foregrounding love and emotional connection as key components of their identities. This reconceptualisation of masculinity, rooted in care and equality, has profound implications for the development of strength-based, gender-transformative programmes that promote sexual health and well-being among young men in Southern Africa.

Melusi Andile Dlamini's chapter, 'Love as resistance? Young men's narratives on intimate relationships and healthy sexualities in South Africa', investigates the ways in which young men in working-class townships of Durban negotiate their masculinities within the realm of intimate relationships. Through qualitative interviews with 34 young men, the chapter explores the tension between traditional expectations of male dominance and the young men's desire for equitable, respectful relationships. It examines how men reject harmful masculine stereotypes, particularly those rooted in violence and emotional suppression, by fostering healthier forms of emotional vulnerability and relational integrity. This resistance to normative masculinity is linked to

positive sexual health outcomes, as the young men's redefinition of masculinity promotes mutual respect, open communication and a rejection of coercive sexual practices. The chapter argues that this shift towards love-centred masculinity provides a framework for developing interventions that promote healthy sexualities and relationships, not only benefiting the young men themselves but also contributing to broader shifts towards gender equality.

In Chapter 4, 'Navigating love, romance and sexual health: adolescent boys' experiences in a South African township', Tsidiso Tolla, Jennifer Nyawira Githaiga and Christopher J. Colvin examine the lived experiences of adolescent boys in a South African township, with a focus on how digital platforms such as social media influence their understanding and pursuit of love and romance. Drawing from interviews and ethnographic data, the chapter reveals the ways in which boys balance traditional Nguni cultural practices with the rapidly evolving landscape of digital communication. The authors argue that social media platforms not only shape romantic ideals but also provide spaces where young boys negotiate their masculinities in ways that challenge traditional norms. Furthermore, it highlights the implications of this digital mediation for their sexual health, as the boys encounter new pressures to conform to dominant sexual norms while simultaneously experiencing opportunities for greater emotional expression and connection. The authors conclude by discussing the potential of leveraging digital platforms in interventions aimed at promoting healthier, more equitable relationships among adolescent boys in similar contexts.

## Social norms, masculinity and health

The contributors in this section focus on the ways in which dominant masculine norms take shape in ways that revolve around sexual risk-taking, violence and the subordination of other 'softer' boys. These norms have effects, especially for young women's sexual autonomy and young men's behaviours related to contraceptive use and sexual diseases. While these dominant norms are pervasive, the authors in this section give attention to the contextual specificities that shape and are shaped by understandings of masculinity, including race, age and class. Implications for sexual health shape the conversations about masculine social norms within these diverse country locations.

In Chapter 5, 'Masculine norms and sexual health implications for young men in Zimbabwe', Sophie Bagnay, Morten Skovdal, Rufurwokuda Maswera, Louisa Moorhouse, Phyllis Magoge-Mandizvidza, Brian Moyo, Simon Gregson and Constance Nyamukapa explore the complexity and diversity of masculine social norms among young Zimbabwean men, examining how these norms shape their sexual and reproductive health behaviours. Using survey data, the authors assess how different forms of masculinity influence sexual risk-taking, attitudes towards HIV prevention and engagement in sexual health services. The chapter builds on the four-dimensional model developed by Rhead et al. (2019) to categorise masculine social norms into toughness,

antifemininity, sex drive and social status. Through a detailed analysis of cross-generational data, the chapter reveals significant variations in how these norms are internalised and enacted by young men, with some adhering to conservative notions of male sexuality that perpetuate risk, while others engage in more progressive, health-conscious behaviours. The chapter also investigates the role of economic, social and familial pressures in reinforcing these norms, particularly in relation to the persistent HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. It concludes by offering practical recommendations for policymakers and health practitioners to develop targeted interventions that challenge harmful masculine norms and encourage healthier behaviours among young men.

Chapter 6, 'Exploring the intersection of young men's mobile-internet use, gender attitudes and intimate relationship dynamics: a mixed-methods study', is authored by Julie Pulerwitz, Pamela Keilig, Cherie Cawood, David Khanyile, Bhekumusa Lukhele and Ann Gottert. This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of how mobile phones and internet use intersect with young men's gender attitudes and intimate relationships in Southern Africa. Drawing from a mixed-methods study that includes large-scale surveys and qualitative interviews with men from Eswatini and South Africa, the authors explore how digital technologies shape young men's perceptions of gender roles, relationship control and sexual health. The findings reveal a dichotomy in how digital tools are used: on one hand, some men utilise social media and mobile platforms to monitor and control their partners, perpetuating gender inequities and reinforcing patriarchal norms; on the other hand, digital platforms also provide young men with access to information about sexual health, relationship dynamics and gender equity, enabling them to challenge traditional masculine ideals and foster more egalitarian relationships. The chapter highlights the potential of digital interventions to promote healthier, more equitable masculinities by engaging young men through the technologies they use daily. The authors argue for the need to develop gender-transformative digital content that not only addresses sexual health but also tackles underlying gender inequalities in relationships.

In Chapter 7, 'Streetwise masculinities: poverty, risk-taking and sexual health in a South African township', Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi draws on qualitative data generated through photovoice, in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with approximately 25 black boys aged 14–17 years, living in marginalised peri-urban communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. These communities, marked by high levels of poverty and unemployment, provide a lens through which to explore how masculinity is shaped by neighbourhood contexts. Against this backdrop, the chapter examines how young men, on the cusp of adulthood, navigate an environment rife with structural violence and limited opportunities for social mobility. The young men interviewed often spoke of how economic deprivation led to increased frustration and a sense of competition within their communities. This intra-racial tension, exacerbated by close-knit neighbourhood dynamics, often translated into violent confrontations, with masculinity being constructed in ways that align with dominance, physical strength and the subjugation of others. Yet, amidst this, the chapter

also highlights moments of resistance, where some young men challenge these norms by seeking alternative pathways that emphasise solidarity, care and mutual support. One of the significant contributions of this chapter is its focus on how young men negotiate these conflicting pressures in their everyday lives. By examining the lived experiences of these young men, the chapter calls for a rethinking of current approaches to gender and development, advocating for interventions that address both the material and cultural dimensions of inequality.

In Chapter 8, 'Masculinities in transition: young trans men, gender and the South African health care system', Landa Mabenge and Pierre Brouard engage in a critical dialogue about the experiences of young trans men within the South African health care system, drawing on the personal experiences of the authors – one a trans man and the other a gay man. In light of the paucity of data on young trans men's experiences within the South African health care system, the authors draw on broader trans health literature and personal narratives to extrapolate potential areas of concern and opportunity. Their specific concern is on young trans men aged 14–24, a population that remains largely invisible in both health care research and policy. The health care encounters of young trans men in South Africa are shaped by multiple layers of stigma, trans denialism and deeply entrenched gendered expectations. These barriers manifest not only in access to gender-affirming care but also in how general health care services are delivered to trans men, who may require care that is not related to their gender identity but is nonetheless affected by the prejudices and assumptions of health care providers. The chapter highlights the lack of adequate training among health professionals regarding trans-specific health needs, leading to a health system that reinforces cisnormativity and marginalises trans individuals, often subjecting them to misgendering, inappropriate questioning or outright denial of care. The authors also advocate for the creation of trans-friendly spaces within health care facilities, where trans men can feel safe, respected and supported in their health care needs. This chapter highlights the need for structural changes within the health care system and offers a vision for a more inclusive, equitable future in which trans men can access the care they need without fear of stigma or denial.

## Masculinity and sexual risk

Risky sexual behaviour, the significance of peer relationships, expressions of heterosexual power and intimate partner violence emerge as important issues that confront and shape young masculinity. This section therefore focuses on masculinity and its intersection with sexual risk. Contributors examine these and related issues, adopting a theoretical lens which places masculinity at the centre of analysis in relation to broader social conditions which shape sexual risk and create health problems for young men and within their intimate heterosexual relationship. While women and girls are most vulnerable to HIV, young men have poorer HIV-related health outcomes. Access to health care services is

intricately connected to masculinity. The authors in this section explore these connections, masculine norms and the impact on health outcomes.

Chapter 9 entitled, 'Living on the edge: Young masculinity, poverty and sexual health', is written by Deevia Bhana. This chapter focuses on young, unemployed black men living in a township in South Africa, exploring the intersections of poverty, unemployment and masculinity in shaping their sexual behaviours and health outcomes. Through a series of in-depth interviews, the chapter reveals how these men navigate the challenges of economic deprivation and social marginalisation by asserting their masculinity through crime, substance abuse and heterosexual dominance. The pressure to conform to dominant masculine ideals – rooted in power, sexual conquest and control over women – leads many young men to engage in risky sexual behaviours, such as unprotected sex and multiple sexual partnerships. The chapter also explores how these men rationalise their engagement in these behaviours as a way to assert their masculinity in the absence of traditional markers of success, such as employment or financial stability. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from critical masculinities studies, the chapter argues that addressing the broader socio-economic context is essential for promoting healthier masculinities and reducing sexual health risks among young men in marginalised communities. The chapter concludes with a call for more comprehensive interventions that address not only individual behaviours but also the structural inequalities that constrain young men's ability to engage in positive forms of masculinity.

Chapter 10, '*Amajita*: masculinity and sexual risk among young men in a South African informal settlement', co-authored by Seluleko Eric Ngcobo, Kaymarlin Govender and Wenche Dageid, examines the role of peer groups, particularly amajita (a social group of young men), in shaping masculinity and sexual behaviour among young men in an informal settlement in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings are based on qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with 17 young men, revealing how belonging to amajita is associated with social pressure associated with risky sexual practices, such as multiple sexual partnerships and the denigration of non-normative sexualities. The authors argue that these peer group dynamics are reinforced by hegemonic notions of masculinity, which valorise sexual prowess and heterosexual dominance as key markers of masculine success. The chapter also explores how young men who fail to conform to these expectations are ostracised or ridiculed, creating a cycle of social exclusion that further entrenches risky behaviours. The chapter highlights the need for community-based interventions that engage with peer groups and challenge the cultural ideals that underpin harmful masculine practices. By fostering alternative forms of masculinity within peer groups, interventions can promote healthier sexual behaviours and contribute to reducing the spread of sexually transmitted infections.

In Chapter 11, entitled, '*Mjolo*, waithood and masculinities among out-of-school young men in Zimbabwe', Manase Kudzai Chiweshe explores how young men in Mbare, Zimbabwe, navigate their sexual identities within the context of mjolo (dating relationships) and waithood (the extended transition

to adulthood). The study focuses on out-of-school adolescents, who face prolonged economic hardship and limited opportunities for education or formal employment. As these young men grapple with the uncertainty of their future, they engage in relationships that both affirm and complicate their sense of masculinity. The chapter analyses how these young men experience pressure to conform to societal expectations of sexual prowess while navigating the economic and social constraints that limit their opportunities for marriage or long-term partnerships. The chapter highlights the ways in which these young men's sexual behaviours are shaped by their desire to assert their masculinity in a context where traditional markers of adulthood, such as stable employment or marriage, are delayed or unattainable. The chapter also examines the sexual health risks associated with these behaviours, particularly the high rates of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies, and offers recommendations for community-based interventions that address the structural factors contributing to waithood and its impact on young men's sexual health.

In Chapter 12, 'Peer pressure and heterosexual norms among young black men in Somkhele, South Africa', Roselyn Kanyemba, Kaymarlin Govender and Guy Harling examine the ways in which hegemonic masculinity shapes sexual behaviour among young black men in Somkhele, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, particularly in the context of peer pressure and heterosexual norms. Through interviews with 20 young black men aged 18–24, the chapter explores how peer dynamics influence these young men's understanding and performance of masculinity. In this environment, masculinity is validated through heterosexual conquests, with men encouraged to pursue multiple sexual partners as a demonstration of power and status. This not only perpetuates gender inequality but also increases the vulnerability of both young men and their sexual partners to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. The chapter also highlights the role of peer groups in perpetuating hegemonic masculinity, with young men using their interactions with friends to measure and validate their masculine identity. Peer pressure often manifests through conversations that glorify sexual exploits, creating a competitive environment where young men feel compelled to 'prove' their masculinity by taking sexual risks. These risks are compounded by the socio-economic realities of the region, where poverty, limited education and a lack of access to health care services further exacerbate the challenges young men face in making informed sexual health decisions. The chapter concludes with recommendations for developing gender-transformative interventions that challenge hegemonic masculinity and promote healthier, more equitable relationships.

## Masculinity and HIV

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in how HIV is understood and addressed, particularly among young people. As the global response to HIV evolves, moving towards a chronic disease management model as promoted by the UNAIDS 95-95-95 strategy, the immediate threat of HIV has receded from

public consciousness. Young people today, unlike previous generations, have not witnessed the devastating toll of HIV at its peak. This shift has significant implications for how young men, especially those navigating their masculinities in Southern Africa, perceive the severity of the virus and their own vulnerability to it. The prevailing narrative now positions HIV as a manageable condition, one that can be controlled through effective treatment. While this is undoubtedly a success in many respects, the focus on treatment coverage has inadvertently side-lined the HIV prevention agenda, particularly the need for targeted social and behavioural interventions that address the underlying factors driving sexual risk. The result is a generation of young men who may see HIV as 'out of sight, out of mind', leading to complacency around prevention and a diminished sense of urgency in addressing the behaviours that increase HIV transmission, such as low condom use, multiple and concurrent partners and age-disparate sex. Masculinity plays a crucial role in shaping young men's sexual behaviours, attitudes towards risk and engagement with HIV prevention strategies. Dominant forms of masculinity, particularly those emphasising heterosexual prowess, risk-taking and control, continue to fuel behaviours that place young men and their partners at risk. This section of the book explores how young men in Southern Africa negotiate their masculinities in the context of HIV, and how these negotiations impact their sexual health practices.

In Chapter 13, Luca Manual Kaupp, Douglas Muchemwa, Morten Skovdal, Phyllis Magoge-Mandizvidza, Rufurwokuda Maswera, Simon Gregson and Constance Nyamukapa's chapter, 'How young Zimbabwean men's attitudes towards female PrEP use depend on gender norms', explores how gender norms shape young Zimbabwean men's attitudes towards women's use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention. Through a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the authors investigate how young men perceive PrEP in relation to their own sexual health and the sexual autonomy of women. The findings reveal a complex relationship between gender norms and PrEP use: while young men often support PrEP as a tool for HIV prevention among women engaged in casual or transactional sexual relationships, they are less supportive of PrEP use among women in long-term, committed relationships. This resistance is tied to the perception that PrEP undermines male control within the relationship, challenging patriarchal norms that position men as gatekeepers of sexual health decisions. The chapter highlights the need for gender-sensitive health interventions that address these underlying power dynamics and promote a more equitable approach to HIV prevention. By challenging the gendered assumptions that shape attitudes towards PrEP, the authors argue that public health programmes can more effectively engage young men in efforts to reduce HIV transmission.

In Chapter 14, 'HIV game-changers? A modified scoping review of adolescent boys and young men's sexual health in the context of PrEP and ART in Southern Africa', Tsitsi B. Masvawure and Frerik Smit provide an in-depth exploration of how biomedical interventions such as PrEP and antiretroviral therapy (ART) are reshaping the landscape of HIV prevention and sexual

health for adolescent boys and young men in Southern Africa. Both PrEP and ART are pivotal tools in the UNAIDS Fast Track vision to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. The chapter examines the extent to which PrEP and ART are being utilised by adolescent boys (aged 15–19) and young men (aged 20–24) in ten Southern African countries: Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Findings from the review indicate that while PrEP and ART have been positioned as biomedical solutions to HIV, the uptake and effectiveness of these interventions are deeply intertwined with cultural and social constructions of masculinity. These gendered expectations can act as barriers to the adoption of PrEP and ART, as young men may perceive these interventions as undermining their autonomy or masculinity. In conclusion, this chapter calls for a rethinking of how PrEP and ART are positioned within the broader framework of sexual health for young men in Southern Africa. While biomedical interventions offer promising pathways to HIV prevention, they must be coupled with efforts to address the gendered dimensions of sexual health. Without acknowledging and engaging with the role that masculinities play in shaping young men's responses to PrEP and ART, the full potential of these technologies may not be realised.

Chapter 15, 'Research with adolescent boys and young men living with HIV – reflections on ethical and methodological challenges in the Eastern Cape, South Africa', written by Lesley Gittings, Sinebhongo Mbula and Phakamani Kom, provides insight into a two-year longitudinal study that was conducted in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, focusing on the health practices and ethical dilemmas encountered in researching adolescent boys and young men living with perinatally-acquired HIV. Despite having lower vulnerability to HIV acquisition compared to young women, adolescent boys and young men living with HIV experience poorer health outcomes, particularly regarding ART adherence and service engagement. The chapter discusses the health outcomes and vulnerabilities specific to boys and young men living with perinatally-acquired HIV, including the social, cultural and ethical dimensions of care and research in this population. One of the central themes explored is the role of *ulwaluko*, a traditional rite of passage that is highly valued in many communities but poses particular challenges for boys living with HIV. The physical and emotional demands of this practice, coupled with the stigma surrounding HIV, make adherence to ART especially difficult during and after the initiation process. This cultural intersection presents ethical challenges for researchers, who must balance respect for traditional practices with the imperative to promote the health and well-being of the participants. This case study illustrates the tensions between maintaining confidentiality, navigating the stigma attached to HIV and ensuring that participants receive the necessary support to access health services and adhere to ART. The authors argue that meaningful participation in HIV and sexual health research requires an intentional response to the gendered realities of these young men. In conclusion, the chapter provides

recommendations for ethically conducting research with adolescent boys and young men living with HIV, highlighting the importance of contextualising interventions within the socio-cultural realities that shape their lives.

'Theorising "other" masculinities among adolescent boys and young men in Southern Africa: implications for sexual health' is the final chapter of the book. In this concluding chapter, we synthesise insights from the preceding contributions to theorise 'other' masculinities among adolescent boys and young men in Southern Africa, highlighting their implications for sexual health research, analysis and action. We begin by challenging the monolithic and often negative portrayals of African masculinities – frequently depicted as reckless, sexually dominant and violent – by emphasising the plurality, fluidity and context-specific nature of young masculinities in the region. We outline five key themes that emerge across the chapters offering critical entry points for understanding and engaging 'other' masculinities: uncomfortable complicity, resistance, diversity and intersectionality, situatedness, and socio-technical realities. These themes highlight the importance of moving beyond one-dimensional portrayals of masculinities. The chapter calls for a critical understanding of how young men navigate their identities and relationships, emphasising the potential for transformation and the promotion of sexual health. It positions 'other' masculinities as a critical problem space for future research and action, advocating for interventions that are responsive to the complex realities of young men's lives in Southern Africa. By understanding and addressing these diverse masculinities, sexual health interventions can become more inclusive and effective, tailored to the specific needs and challenges faced by different groups of young men.

By embracing the rich plurality of young masculinities in Southern Africa, this book invites us to reimagine sexual health interventions that are not only more inclusive and effective but also transformative for young men beyond the region.

## Note

1 The 1994 Cairo Programme of Action emerged from the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo, Egypt (September, 1994). This landmark conference marked a significant shift in global population and development discourse, emphasising human rights and social, economic and political factors affecting people's lives over mere demographic targets.

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