

# Re-Imagining Masculinity Through Social Empathy

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Accepted: 15 April 2022 | Published: 1 May 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajbs.2022.4.1.8>

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**Abstract:** *The language of crises speaks differently for both men and women. With women, children, and the elders having to face the impacts more prominently, these groups of people are constantly marginalised, especially during troubled times. During this COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most concerning crises that arise is the crisis that involves societal life, gender relations, and masculinity performances, heightening the issue of gender inequality. The increasing number of domestic violence in particular countries shows that the essentialist idea of masculinity plays a big part in shaping men's response to the socio-gender crisis. This paper discusses how masculinity can be reimagined towards behaviours that embrace social empathy.*

**Keywords:** Masculinity, social empathy, gender inequality, vulnerability

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## 1. Introduction

During the hardest, troubling times, the language of crises speaks differently for both men and women. But it intensifies the effects on the vulnerable and marginalised amongst the society like women, the elderly, children, members of subordinated cultural or racial groups, and other socially marginalised groups because they have the least access to or control over resources needed to cope with and overcome the crises (Tutnjevic, 2004).

Amid this COVID-19 pandemic, crises arise in many forms that impact the whole world. One of the most perturbing crises that continuously intensified during this pandemic is the crisis that involves societal life, gender relations, and masculinities' performances (Mellström, 2020). The most alarming consequences of the pandemic and the temporary lockdown policies in many countries that implicate a gender's response are the drastic increase in the domestic violence of men against their partners (Ruxton & Burrell, 2020). There is a leap of 30% in domestic violence cases in some countries (Wojnicka, 2021), which further heightens the issue of gender inequality. The increasing number of domestic violence shows that the essentialist idea of masculinity plays a big part in shaping men's response to the socio-gender crisis.

The notion of masculinity screams for deconstruction, especially in times of crisis. It gives in to the stereotype that men need to rely on violence to redirect their emotions to appear and retain their masculinity. This paper proposes the concept of reimagining masculinity through social empathy. It is an alternative method of approaching masculine behaviours and traits that are not associated with the toxic conduct of masculinity. This paper aims to prescribe a whole new dimension of being a man that utilises social empathy as part of masculine culture. It is

not by any means creating a new subdivision of masculinity but redefining or rebranding masculinities that will incline towards a more positive outcome for both men and women. It is a form of acceptance, celebration, and alliance to those men who can defy the oppressive ideas and expectations on how they have to behave and act as the 'ideal' man in the eyes of an unjust society.

With that being said, social empathy in masculinity can ensure diversity, open-ended gender relations, and alternatives representation for modern men to perform their masculinities with pride. In framing the concept of reimagining masculinity, social empathy can be seen as paving the way for the masculine culture to acknowledge vulnerabilities and incorporate values of care within their behaviours. This notion could challenge the toxic idea of masculinity.

## **2. Literature Review**

Sociologists define masculinities as social roles, behaviours, and meanings prescribed for men in any given society at any one time and produced within the institutions of society and through our daily interactions (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). Femininity and masculinity are rooted in one's gender rather than one's sex and depend on how societal members decide what male or female means. For example, in some societies, males and females are perceived as dominant or passive, brave or emotional (Stets & Burke, 2000).

The belief that we need to comply with gender roles during crises pushes men to have a few self-expectations. The first is to consider that their role should be highly agentic, and the second is to display traits such as stoicism and strength. The third is to take the provider's part outside the home while holding a higher status role in society (Fisher & Ryan, 2021). These expectations hurt women as they are to take conventional feminine gender roles, taking the part of the caregiver within the home and lower status roles in society (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Such gender expectations invite one of the most explicit manifestations of gender inequality: men's use of violence against women and girls, especially for those who have recently lost their role as the breadwinner of the family. They tend to engage in verbal and physical aggression toward their partners. They cannot display feelings of anxiety or distress because of fear of appearing too feminine and thereby losing their tenuous masculine status (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Consequently, men may also tend to enact violence against female or minoritised gender partners to regain a sense of masculinity, control, or power in their relationships (Copenhaver et al., 2000).

Kaufman (1999) stated that one of the ways to challenge this toxic outlook of masculinity is by redefining masculinity or dismantling the psychic and social structures of gender that bring with them such threats. Connell (2005) and other relevant scholars on men's studies have demonstrated the existence of multiple types of masculinities since these models of masculinity are changing over time and acquiring different forms depending on their social context (Flecha et al., 2013).

Therefore, fostering social empathy could challenge the toxic ideas of masculinity as it could lead them to acknowledge their feelings of vulnerability and incorporate values and behaviours of care. There are constant debates in a few psychological studies indicating that men do not feel empathy as much as women do. Studies using self-report measures to assess empathy are the most convincing study to acknowledge the gender differences in expressing empathy (Rueckert, 2011). In all these studies, women score significantly higher than men on the

Emotional Quotient (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980). The differences occur because men may be reluctant to report empathic experiences due to social expectations. After all, when a measure is thought to assess empathy, it may prompt responses influenced by an individual's identification with gender stereotypes (Michalska et al., 2013). It may be because men have been repressing emotions; showing them could align them with femininity.

Seidler (1994) insists that masculine identity can be transformed and is not indissoluble as masculinity takes many forms. Apart from that, Connell also agrees that research on the multiple forms of masculinity may help people recognise the diversity of masculinities, the open-ended possibilities in gender relations - and thus to see alternatives for their own lives.

### **3. Discussion and Conclusion**

Men's ability to foster social empathy can help reimagine masculinity. Empathy has been defined as the ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and to respond to these thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion (Baron-Cohen, 2011), like anger, anxiety, disgust, fear, happiness, pain and sadness (Fan et al., 2010). However, some individuals may react strongly to 'positive empathy' (e.g., empathy for happiness) but inhibit negative empathy by minimising personal distress (Cuff et al., 2016). According to Blair (2005), empathy can respond and exist in three circumstances. The first one is during an encounter with a person who just experienced an emotional event but did not project any emotional indication either verbally or facially due to that emotional experience. The subsequent circumstance is a verbal statement from a third party due to the victim's absence in that situation (Polaschek, 2003; Blair, 2005), retrospectively (Barnett & Mann, 2013), and by inference from one's previous experience (Eisenberg et al., 1991). Empathy can also be evoked by stimuli about a fictional or imaginary person (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Singer & Lamm, 2009; Pelligra, 2011).

When combined with the social aspect, empathy ascends towards a more prominent communal part. It involves the capacity to understand people by recognising or experiencing their life situations and gaining a perception of structural discriminations and disparities (Segal, 2011). Developing social empathy requires people to see themselves with people from the outside. It may increase their sense of efficiency or impact on the outside world and eventually gain an understanding of empowerment (Wagaman, 2011). However, studies show that men are reluctant to report empathic experiences because of social expectations (Davis, 1990, Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Thompson (1992) argued that if men deny their feelings and pain, they will not be able to acknowledge the pain of others. The concept of empathic experience is also supported by Donovan (2007), who stated that men need to gain the courage and ability to recognise and express 'unmanly emotions' that challenge dominant definitions of masculinity. He believes that if men owned and expressed their pain and fear, their experience of anger would be lessened, and their violence reduced. Hence, when an individual uses perspective-taking skills to understand context, they can begin to think about ways to take action that will improve social conditions (Segal, 2011).

Fostering social empathy can generate men's ability to acknowledge their vulnerability and understand others'. Generally defined, vulnerability is the inability of a system to withstand the trepidations of external stressors (Paul, 2013). Emotional vulnerability is applied when humans feel exposed to certain conditions that threaten their emotional tranquillity, such as being rejected, shamed, or judged as inadequate (Brown 2012, Grande, 2019). According to Cohen

(1990), men experience this emotional vulnerability as often as women but express them less because it is intimately linked with the hierarchy. Emotional control is a sign of superiority (Craib, 1994). As Brene Brown said in her 2012 TED Talk, "Listening to Shame," men and women experience shame differently. As the feeling of shame is associated with being emotionally vulnerable, women generally feel that they must "Do it all; do it perfectly, and never let them see you sweat!" On the other hand, men tend to feel that they must follow the rule: "Do not be perceived as weak."

In opposing that notion, this research advocated that acknowledging vulnerability is being able to pay attention to both 'positive' and 'painful' experiences, such as shame and guilt (Probyn, 2004; Gorton, 2007). Men who can acknowledge the presence of vulnerabilities can also ensure healthy relationship development both with women and other men. In other words, when men generate social empathy, they are more prepared to show emotions in front of other men leading them to a 'softening' (Roberts, 2015) approach in times of conflict. In addition, these socially empathic men may also reject the language of 'crisis' (Anderson, 2008; White & Peretz, 2009; Forrest, 2010; Montes, 2013; Roberts, 2015) because they can understand others' predicament. Furthermore, it accentuates that vulnerable men are more inclined toward solving the conflict more peacefully rather than plunging into aggression and violence. As discussed by Bergara et al. (2010), some of the axes that men's movement for equality fights for is their commitment to personal change in expressing emotions and vulnerabilities. Thus, getting men to understand their feelings is central to addressing gender inequalities (Sattel, 1976; Seidler, 1991; Hooks, 2004; Kimmel & Holler, 2011; Boise & Hearn, 2017).

Besides that, social empathy in masculinity can project men's ability to incorporate values of care. The work of care and nurture is also traditionally avoided by men as a means to retain their masculinity (Hearn, 2001). Men's involvement in caring and nurturing work could influence a healthier lifestyle and relationship with others (Kimmel, 2010) because having the ability to care for others requires an emotional investment that could allow men to combat the need to be aggressive, and possessive, distant and dominant towards others. Since the central features of caring masculinities consist of men's rejection of domination and their integration of care values, such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality into masculine identities (Elliott, 2016), forming social empathy is a crucial part of caring for others.

Incorporating values of care also involves the work of men who show caretaking and nurturing behaviours to others (Hanlon, 2009). Caretaking and nurturing are crucial factors, albeit some men tend to be selective towards the actual care work based on societal expectations of men. (Hanlon, 2012). For instance, providing education, a home and introducing children to public masculine-defined spaces. Lynch et al. (2009) describe men's typical involvement in caring as 'care commanding'; whilst not absent from care, men tend to be involved in more formal events, such as birthdays, religious ceremonies, family outings, and various gendered supportive care roles.

Doing care work is also associated with having a more flexible definition of masculinity. Hanlon (2012) continued that it helps men develop 'softer masculinity' and acknowledge their vulnerability while also empathising with and understanding women's responsibilities and complexities in doing caring works. Thus, the feeling of social empathy for others helps men utilise values of care and nurture. In a way, doing caretaking work can induce men to feel more empowered and responsible. For men to change for the better, power must be redefined to empower men while doing tasks that are not traditionally for men (Pease, 2014).

In conclusion, masculinity needs to be associated with social empathy. Fostering social empathy in masculinity could help challenge the existing toxic stereotype of masculinity that associated the masculine culture with violence, which could negatively impact other marginalised groups of people like women, the elders, and children, especially during this pandemic.

### Acknowledgement

This study was funded by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS/1/2021/SSI0/UKM/02/20)

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