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The modern male in a tribal society: Perceptions of Masculinity across gender

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Abstract

Traditional values persist, especially in tribal and patriarchal societies, but the roles of women and men have undergone gradual changes in modern times. This study examines perceptions of masculinity in a contemporary tribal society. It is a qualitative study with primary data collected from the Mizos of Mizoram, India. The data were analyzed using Anthropac software. The study investigated how masculinity is defined and the traits attributed to men. While both genders expect a Mizo male to be responsible and reliable, there are gendered differences in perceptions: Men focus more on physical qualities, while women emphasize family responsibilities.

Keywords: Masculinity, Gender, Male roles, Unmanly

Introduction

Masculinity is created, modified, and expressed by individuals through social interaction; being a provider for the family, a hard worker, a good leader, a problem solver, and being knowledgeable fall into this category of masculinity (Jabeen, 2018). The roles, actions, and characteristics that are seen as suitable for boys and men in a certain society are referred to as masculinity. It is virtually universally believed that true masculinity originates from men's bodies, either because it is innate in a male body or because it expresses something about a male body (Connell, 2005).

Boys and men are urged to reject or avoid everything stereotypically feminine, to be strong and aggressive, and to repress emotions (apart from anger), to physically and emotionally separate themselves from other males, and to pursue competitiveness, success, and power as part of the socialization of masculinity (Mankowski & Smith, 2016). Males are expected to display strength and dominance, especially over others, according to traditional masculinity norms, and the underlying constrictive stereotypes demand that males be strong, independent, stoic, and powerful (Connor et al., 2021).

One ideal of masculinity was controlling oneself, while another involved dominating others (Asikainen, 2018). According to Reeser and Gottzén (2018), women are identified with the earthly, the corporeal, and the irrational, while men are thought to be rational and unemotional, emotionally damaged, or somewhat stoic. In civilizations that value masculinity, men are expected to behave more manly, have greater influence, and earn more money (Laigo, 2020). Men's activities in the reproductive, or home, sphere are largely incidental, but they play significant roles in the producing sphere. When it comes to domestic tasks, men are usually limited to making financial decisions like purchasing a home or enrolling their children in school (Stein, 2014).

The term "gender role" describes how society expects people to behave and look in accordance with socially constructed standards of masculinity and femininity. The various expectations that people, groups, and societies have of people based on their sex, as well as the values and beliefs that each civilization has regarding gender, form the basis of gender roles (Blackstone et al., 2003). "Unmanliness" is more frequently linked to feminine physical characteristics and actions (e.g., attire, makeup), and violence against women (Żadkowska et al., 2025). Men are greatly discouraged from seeking mental health assistance by traditional masculinity ideals, underscoring the necessity for culturally relevant programs that remove these obstacles (Mokhwelepa, 2025). Internalized male norms harmed men's help-seeking behavior. Men's reluctance to ask for assistance is mostly reinforced by conventional male norms (Staiger et al., 2020).

In pre-colonial times, the Zawlbuk were an integral part of Mizo settlements. The Zawlbuk provided unmarried men with a unifying environment where they studied life skills, cultural customs, and the art of governing during a period when tribal people lived in close-knit towns (Lalhmachhuana, 2018). The behavior and style of life of young men and boys in Mizo history were greatly influenced by Zawlbuk, a male bachelor's dorm (Lalhrualiana, 2023). For young men and boys who wished to learn about sex, manners, traditions, customs, and etiquette, as well as the arts of wrestling, singing, dance, oratory, handicrafts, and battle technique, the Zawlbuk essentially functioned as a training ground (Hlawndo, 2011).

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to probe into the definitions and perceptions of masculinity and the expected characteristics of a Mizo male across genders.

Methodology

The study is qualitative, where the primary data is collected through key informant interviews using an Interview Guide. Aizawl and Lunglei districts in Mizoram, India, were selected as study areas. Five male and five female informants were purposely selected from each district. The informants or free-listers comprised academicians, historians, social activists, church leaders, and researchers of Mizo culture. Data has been analyzed using Anthropic software and presented in the form of free-listing tables.

Freelisting is a qualitative interviewing technique. It is a great tool for quickly examining how a group of people defines and conceptualizes a certain area. Frequency refers to the response's highest ranking when calculating the number of replies by the informant, and Salience refers to elements that the informant first mentioned.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented in three sections, viz., definition of masculinity, perceptions of characteristics of a man, and perceptions of unmanly characteristics of a man.

Definition of Masculinity

Among Mizo men, a man is mostly defined as “someone fearless or brave” (80%), which mostly refers to the traditional expectation and norm that men protect their village from wild creatures and enemies. The modern Mizo male is also thus defined as a fearless person who never absconds from problems. This is followed by the definition of “man” or “male person” as someone who is responsible or who takes responsibility in different situations (30%). A man should be responsible for his family, as well as for the well-being of the people around him. That a “man” is a source of security, possesses leadership qualities, has critical thinking skills, and has self-determination constituted a fifth (20%) of each of the total responses. Informants went on to describe that a “man” should never be a source of trouble for his family, should speak up for his views and perceptions, even if they are not everyone's ideas, and should be able to think rationally.

A tenth (10%) of each of the responses was attributed to a “man” being someone who is a Breadwinner, a stubborn person, not involved in household chores, having a high level of endurance, and being the decision maker. He should be able to provide for his family, or at the very least generate income for himself. In Mizo society, men are rarely involved in household tasks, and if they did, they would be referred to as '*Thaibawih*' or henpecked, taking on childcare and domestic responsibilities, or even showing too much concern for their spouse and children, running against local masculinity norms (Burgher & Flood, 2019). He should also be powerful and capable of making his own decisions, particularly in family behaviors.

On the other hand, most female informants (60%) defined masculinity as being responsible, that a man must be responsible enough to look after his family at all times. This is followed by masculinity as trustworthiness (50%), where a man should also be trustworthy in the workplace and dependable for his family and community. Women attributed 40% each to the definition of a male person as being a stable person and a breadwinner, and financially stable to provide for his family.

For Mizo women, definitions of masculinity mentioned by men, such as bravery, possessing leadership qualities, having critical thinking skills, determination, being strong, stubborn, not being involved in household chores, and endurance, were not mentioned at all. Whereas for men, trustworthiness, reliability, and stability in character were not listed as definitions or attributes of masculinity or manliness. Male

definitions of masculinity define manliness mostly as outward displays of power and authority, and possessing several abilities and skills. What women consider masculine seems to refer mostly to someone who offers them security and stability, someone they can rely on financially and emotionally, especially at the relationship and family level. Masculinity or manliness for women does not seem to rely much on outward displays of authority and physical abilities, and is more or less based on the internal characteristics of a person. This can further be understood through the salience of responses where being fearless has the highest salience (0.475) among men, while the highest for females is responsibility (0.508).

Perception of Characteristics of a Man

Among male informants, characteristics of men are mostly defined as fearlessness (60%), which includes the ability to confront his difficulties and never run from them, including the ability to protect his family from dangerous animals and warriors. This is followed by Endurance (40%), a man should possess an endurance-based character that includes the capacity to face difficulty or adversity. Character of man also includes responsibility (30%) and leadership (20%), particularly in a patriarchal tribal society like that of the Mizo. Characteristics such as a person with principles, a source of security, and superiority over women as aspects of a man's character occupied a fifth each (20%) of the total responses. Male informants opined that men should have guiding principles that can help them navigate life, and they are more physically and emotionally capable than women. A tenth (10%) of each of the responses was attributed to characteristics of man as trustworthiness, caring, competence, faithfulness, non-talkativeness, and self-confidence. A man should be dependable for his family and caring when it comes to looking after his wife and children. A man should also know when and how to talk, as well as have faith in his abilities.

On the other hand, female informants perceived that the core characteristic of a man is a sense of superiority. Half (50%) of the responses included that men are superior and possess greater aptitude than females. Men's obligation to be able to financially and materially provide for their families constituted 40% of the responses. Women also expected men to be brave (30%) and not run from issues, and to have the self-confidence to face whatever issues may come their way.

In addition, leadership (20%), trustworthiness (10%), caring (10%), competence (10%), faithfulness (10%), talk less (10%), and self-confidence (10%) were perceived by men as male characteristics, while women do not mention any of these characteristics. However, other characteristics expected of a man cited by female respondents but not opined by male informants are determination (30%) and having forethought and planning skills (20%).

Male perceptions of the characteristics of "man" are mostly towards displays of power and the capacity to face difficulty or adversity. Females consider the character of men as superior to that of women and as family providers. Women respondents did not seem to place as much value on physical prowess or other overt demonstrations of masculinity as men do; instead, they seem to value someone who provides them with security and care. This can further be understood through the salience of responses, where for male

informants, being fearless has the highest salience (0.417), while the highest for females is superiority over women (0.417) and source of comfort (0.400).

Perceptions of unmanly characteristics

Among Mizo men, characteristics considered “unmanly” are behaving like a woman (55.6%), which includes being feminine in speech, body language, and clothing. This is followed by being irresponsible (33.3%) in terms of being unable to provide for his family and neglecting his duties. It also includes being a coward (33.3%), as men are expected to be fearless. Descriptions of unmanly characters also include being untrustworthy (22.2%), self-centered (11.1%), and unemployed (11.1%). On the other hand, female informants considered a man as unmanly when he is irresponsible (80%), as a man should be aware of his duty to provide for his family and should never flee from issues, especially ones that concern family. Another 40% of each of the total responses attributed unmanliness to characteristics such as negligence, unreliability, and narrow-mindedness.

Negligence, undependability, and narrow-mindedness were not mentioned by male informants, whereas self-centeredness was not mentioned by female informants. Male informants typically focus on behaviors and visible expressions of unmanliness, such as in terms of speech, clothing, and body language. They also considered cowardliness to be unmanly. On the other hand, female informants tend to emphasize unmanliness in a person’s character, such as the inability to fulfill one’s responsibilities and the inability to provide for one’s family. This can further be understood through the salience of male responses, where acting like a woman has the highest salience (0.481), while the highest for females is being irresponsible (0.542)

Conclusion

Men don't cry as often as women do, and compared to women, men are more physically violent, and women look after children more often than men (Burgher & Flood, 2019). Most of the descriptions of who a man is refer to his physical prowess, which, strangely, is a more common description given by male informants themselves in this particular study. Sakalli Ugurlu et al. (2018) found that men were mostly defined as being envious, powerful, selfish, passionate, ambitious, angry, impolite, childish, logical, careful, smart, honest, brave, and protective. In the current study, the characteristics of men are associated with fearlessness, endurance, responsibility, a source of comfort, and a sense of superiority, which include the ability to confront difficulties and never run from them. Males are superior to females in nature and possess greater aptitude than females. This study shows that in the perception of both genders, men are obligatorily the providers of the family and are expected to be financially stable. While women associate manliness with possessing characteristics of reliability, responsibility, and trustworthiness, men tend to emphasize outward manifestations and displays of power. This is evident in both the descriptions of expected manly characteristics as well as in descriptions of unmanly characteristics. However, both genders perceive men as superior to women, which is also evident in other studies such as Brzycki (2004). According to Chauraya & Mugodzwa (2009), masculine characteristics are power, strength, force, manhood, and manliness. According

to this study, a man who acts like a woman is unreliable, negligent, and undependable; the character is unmanly. Paprzycka et al. (2022) also defined unmanly character as a lack of mental strength, indecision, a lack of courage, dependence, a lack of responsibility, a lack of ambition, failure to take care of one's partner, family, and home, and possessing an unmanly appearance.

Much is expected of a man, especially in a patriarchal society. This study shows the various definitions and characteristics of who and what a man is and is expected to be in modern tribal society. With so many expectations made on men by women and the men themselves, and the large role played by men in traditional Mizo tribal society, it becomes an onerous task for the modern tribal male to be considered “manly” and follow in the footsteps of his forefathers.

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