

What does it mean to be a man?

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Photo: picture alliance/Xinhua News Agency/Wang Ze

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Photo: Courtesy of AFIKARIS Gallery and the artist



Cover: [##Pharaons@des crevasses.org](https://descrevasses.org) by Jean David Nkot (see p. 4).

The traditional image of the dominant man is currently experiencing a renaissance, partly because powerful men are deliberately using it to cement their authoritarian rule. Women suffer particularly from this, and many of them pay with their lives. On the other hand, more and more men are advocating for equal rights and less rigid gender roles. Ultimately, both sexes stand to benefit from more gender equality.

ARTIST

Jean David Nkot

Instagram: @jeandavidnkot

The painter and sculptor Jean David Nkot lives and works in Douala, Cameroon, where he was born in 1989. He is interested in North-South relations and addresses issues such as the exploitation of resources in Africa and the associated economic and political problems. In his work he also focuses on the effects of capitalism and industrialisation on people and the environment.

By granting workers the status of contemporary icons, Jean David Nkot seeks to counteract their lack of visibility and recognition. He invites us to rethink our economic model in order to protect both people and the planet.

Two works by Jean David Nkot are featured on our cover page and at the beginning of the focus section, respectively.



Credit: Courtesy of AFIKARIS Gallery and the Artist, photo credit © Studio Vanssay



The good news

This year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared **four countries** – Senegal, Fiji, India and Burundi – free of trachoma. They thus join a growing list: there are currently 26 countries where trachoma no longer occurs. The **bacterial eye infection**, classified by the WHO as a neglected tropical disease, is primarily transmitted through personal contact, contaminated surfaces and flies. **Water shortages, poor hygiene and inadequate healthcare** are the main risk factors for the disease, which remains one of the most common causes of **preventable blindness** worldwide. Progress in combating trachoma has been achieved primarily through public education, eye surgery and the distribution of antibiotics.

4 African billionaires

are richer than **750 million people** on the continent, according to an Oxfam report. Together, they hold \$57.4 billion. The report also shows that almost half of the countries with the **highest levels of inequality** in the world are in Africa. To tackle this, Oxfam is calling for higher taxes: while public spending on education, health and social security is being cut, African countries collect an average of only 0.3% of GDP in **wealth taxes**. This puts the continent well behind OECD countries (1.8%), Latin America (0.9%) and Asia (0.6%). In our current focus on elites and their political influence, we examine why super-wealth not only exacerbates inequality but also often undermines democratic processes.

ELECTIONS

Paul Biya is a time loop that Cameroon can't seem to escape

At 92, Paul Biya is the world's oldest head of state. His re-election after 43 years in power reflects Cameroon's political stagnation. The country's youth is disillusioned, and its institutions are incredibly weak. Although no one has broken Biya's record, this situation is not unique in the region.

BY EPAH MFORTAW NYUKECHEN

Biya's supporters describe his continued rule as the people's choice, portraying him as a steady and experienced leader capable of guiding the country through national and regional turbulence and promoting development.

Others argue that Cameroon's political system prioritises continuity and control over competition. Critics cite a complex interplay of structural, political and psychological factors – such as state dominance, elite loyalty, weak institutions and democratic deficits – that are collectively hampering Cameroon's development. In their opinion, irregularities in the election invalidated the result.

Since assuming power in 1982, Paul Biya has entrenched his authority through a dense network of patronage, clientelism and bureaucratic control. Following the introduction of multiparty politics in 1992, he effectively dealt with political pluralism by positioning his party – the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) – at the centre of state power. A study concludes that Biya has installed 1536 senior members of the political administration, 94 % of whom are CPDM members (Mişcoiu and Kakdeu, 2021).

Cameroon's political landscape is rooted in the past and offers limited space for genuine political inclusion, let alone change. The country's public administration plays a central



Photo: picture alliance/Xinhua News Agency/Wang Ze

President Paul Biya at his eighth swearing-in ceremony in Yaoundé in November.

role in maintaining the current political order. It is a tool for political preservation. Appointments, promotions and resource distribution depend on political loyalty rather than merit. This politicisation has blurred the line between the state and the ruling party. And while Biya's administration has largely avoided overt repression, critics argue that it has undermined institutional legitimacy and eroded public trust in the political system.

“For many Cameroonians, the 2025 election was not so much a democratic contest as a reaffirmation of entrenched power.”

Against this backdrop, Biya's victory in the 2025 presidential election came as little surprise. Yet many Cameroonians had anticipated a different outcome. With over 60 % of the population under the age of 25, there is a glaring gap between a government led by a 92-year-old and the country's youth. High unemployment, limited opportunities for political participation, persistent frustration over corruption and institutional inefficiency over the decades all contributed to the sense that his re-election was unlikely. This sentiment was further fuelled by the unresolved and seemingly endless violent conflicts in various regions of Cameroon.

DEMOCRATIC FATIGUE

Many observers describe Cameroon's current political trajectory as one marked by “democratic fatigue” – a widespread disillusionment with democratic processes that fail to produce tangible change. For many Cameroonians, the 2025 election was not so much a democratic contest as a ritual reaffirmation of entrenched power. Although political pluralism formally exists, the opposition remains fragmented, marginalised and subject to repression. State institutions are highly politicised, bureaucratic inertia prevails,

“The reality is that, at 92 years old, Biya will not remain president for much longer.”

and selective justice is common. The lack of autonomy and credibility of the electoral commission further reinforces the perception that elections do not alter the balance of power. Biya's re-election ultimately signals a preference for preserving the status quo rather than embracing reform.

Similar patterns of governance prevail across the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS): ageing leadership, manipulated political transitions, electoral irregularities and institutional weakness. Throughout the region, the rhetoric of stability often conceals a deeper reality of democratic stagnation.

Paul Biya's re-election sends a signal that this will continue, thereby influencing political calculations throughout the region. As a key player in ECCAS, Biya's adherence to a policy of non-interference and gradual diplomacy raises questions about the bloc's normative strength and credibility. ECCAS increasingly appears to be a zone of controlled instability, where conflicts are contained but rarely resolved.

Cameroon is at a critical juncture, both nationally and regionally. Domestically, the government under President Biya urgently needs to rethink its approach to leadership. Reforming Cameroon's political culture is essential to ensuring stability, particularly with regard to a possible transition – even within the ruling elite. The reality is that, at 92 years old, Biya will not remain president for much longer, and there's growing pressure from a young, frustrated and increasingly restless population, as well as a volatile geopolitical environment.

The pursuit of continuity could become the country's greatest mistake. Cameroon must abandon the illusion of permanence and begin to envisage a new political order within ECCAS. To maintain its influence in the regional community, it should align itself with those global examples that prioritise inclusivity, generational change, accountability and governance reforms.

LINK

Mişcoiu, S., and Kakeu, L.-M., 2021: Authoritarian clientelism: the case of the president's 'creatures' in Cameroon. *Acta Polit* 56, 639–657. doi.org/10.1057/s41269-020-00188-y



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MULTILATERALISM

Brazil continues to champion climate action and cooperation

The UN Climate Change Conference in the Brazilian city of Belém may be over, but the struggle for the climate, democracy and global cooperation continues. Why it's worth keeping an eye on Brazil post-COP30, too.

BY EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH



Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Eraldo Peres

Chile's President Gabriel Boric, United Nations Secretary General António Guterres, Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Helder Barbalho, governor of the Brazilian state of Pará, at the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Belém, Brazil.

In the midst of a seriously disillusioned global climate debate, Brazil recently announced some positive news: deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has hit its lowest level in over ten years. As delegates from around the world gathered for COP30 in Belém – where, ironically, rainforest was cleared to make way for infrastructure – the host country reported progress on protecting tropical rainforests.

Of course, this is still too little given the challenges the Amazon faces. In some cases, the Brazilian government is actually thwarting its own efforts – drilling for oil is soon to begin near the mouth of the Amazon River, for instance. All the same, the political will is there, and things are moving in the right direction – and that hasn't always been the case. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has declared his goal of completely halting deforestation in Brazil by 2030. He took advantage of the stage offered by COP30 to mobilise international funding for a new “Tropical Forest Forever Facility” to make billions available to protect forests worldwide.

At the international level, Brazil is currently championing values that are being eroded elsewhere: climate action, multilateral cooperation, the rule of law. At the G20, the government urged for a global wealth tax of two percent to be levied on billionaires and pushed to accelerate international negotiations on the issue.

The country has also adopted an unequivocal stance against US President Donald Trump's policies. In the summer, Brazil's Supreme Court ruled that big tech corporations such as Meta, X and Google should be held accountable for users' illegal content. If the law passes, platform operators will be required in future to proactively review and moderate content.

“Brazil is currently championing values that are being eroded elsewhere: climate action, multilateral cooperation, the rule of law.”

The trial of former President Jair Bolsonaro even sparked open conflict with Trump, who attempted to prevent Bolsonaro's conviction. In late July he imposed sanctions against a Supreme Court judge and hiked tariffs on Brazilian products to 50 %. The court nonetheless sentenced the ex-president to 27 years in prison for plotting a coup d'état.

So far, Brazil's strategy seems to be working: its firm stance vis-à-vis Washington has driven up Lula's approval ratings, while Trump even signalled recently that he was willing to hold talks.

“Brazil must be respected,” Lula announced in July in response to Washington's threats. The country is still beset by a whole host of challenges – crime, inequality, corporate power and the fossil industry, threats to the Indigenous way of life, social polarisation. Yet it's worth keeping an eye on this South American country, especially at a time when the international order is shifting and democracies across the world are under pressure.



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WAR

When I left Gaza City, I left my heart beneath the rubble

This is a first-hand account of displacement, pain and the impossibility of saying goodbye. Ansam Al-Kitaa is a freelance journalist from Palestine. She wrote the following on 18 October 2025.

BY ANSAM AL-KITAA

The decision to leave Gaza City was difficult. Gaza City is not just a place for me – it is my life. Being forced to leave felt like having my soul stolen, or like being buried alive.

On 26 September, I experienced what I had always feared: being displaced from Gaza City. I was displaced from my home in the Al-Tuffah neighbourhood and did not really have the chance to say goodbye.

I wish I could embrace its walls, throw myself onto its floor, kiss its cold tiles, which are witnesses to my life story. I wanted to wave to it from afar, as befits a place that has surrounded me in every moment of love, fear, sleepless nights and joy. I wanted to tell it to stay strong, not to worry about the random bombings, to protect its walls, which carry the warmth and love of all my years.

Before the displacement, I didn't realise that I loved my house so much, that it wasn't just walls, but my home and my first love. I spent nights thinking about it, about its little details, its windows that opened onto life, and I wondered: Is it still standing? Can it still embrace us?

Yes, our house has a tender heart. It has held us up in our darkest moments, witnessed our small joys and simple successes and warmly sustained us despite all the cruelty. The houses in Gaza City are not silent stones – they are

beings of flesh and blood, resembling their inhabitants in their patience and deep love for life, the life they deserve.

HUMAN SLAUGHTERHOUSES

Two weeks before we were forced to leave, on 13 September, I was walking with my family near Tamraz station on Al-Nafaq Street, heading towards Al-Mushahara Street. Suddenly, a quadcopter dropped an explosive bomb on the street. The bang of the explosion was deafening. I ran with my mother, my brother Sameh and my brother Mohammed's wife to a nearby mechanic's shop.

Within seconds, I felt a sharp pain in both feet. Soon, blood was spurting from my right and left foot and also from my side. I wasn't the only one who was injured – I found my brother Sameh bleeding and dazed, and my mother was bleeding all over her body. Nevertheless, she desperately tried to check on all of us.

“I did not flee my city —
I fled from the pain
I could no longer bear.”



Gaza City on 3 November 2025.

“I became afraid of hope itself, as if it had become a new trap.”

We stayed with the mechanic for half an hour without an ambulance arriving, until some young men volunteered to bandage our wounds tightly to stop the bleeding. We then found a private vehicle to take us to the hospital. But even there, it wasn't easy – the medical teams were faced with a flood of injured people, and everyone had to wait their turn.

I couldn't hold back my tears. I cried harder than I had ever cried before – as if everything that had been building up inside me was suddenly bursting out. I felt the ter-

rible fear that had accompanied me since the beginning of this war: fear that a piece of shrapnel had hit an artery, that my foot would have to be amputated. At that moment, I thought I would prefer death to the loss of a limb.

When the doctor arrived, she sent me for an X-ray. I could barely walk to the room. The X-ray machine had to be charged. I waited half an hour for the machine to charge and was lucky to be the first one in line. Afterwards, I had a bandage put on and went home exhausted.

But my injury to my left foot started bleeding heavily again, so I went to another hospital, the Al-Shifa Medical Complex, as it was close to where I was staying. There, it turned out that my wound needed to be cleaned, sterilised and stitched with several stitches. During this, I lost consciousness due to exhaustion and fatigue.

The scene at the hospital resembled a massacre: the corridors were filled with wounded people whose faces were covered in blood, and screams filled the room. I stood

next to a wounded man who was lying on the floor, screaming in pain as he called out for his fiancée, who had just lost her life. Next to him, a mother was crying and begging for her bleeding son to be saved.

I felt like I was no longer in a hospital, but in a human slaughterhouse, where open wounds and pain exceeded the limits of human endurance. In Gaza, you can consider yourself lucky if you enter a hospital and leave it with your body intact.

If we hadn't been injured, or if we could have at least received basic treatment, we would definitely have stayed in Gaza City. But the pain of our injuries, the difficulties in receiving treatment and the lack of medication ultimately forced us to flee reluctantly. I did not flee my city – I fled from the pain I could no longer bear, from a reality that was becoming harder than I could endure.

A BITTER FIRST NIGHT ON THE RUN

When it was time to travel south, I walked slowly, tears in my eyes. I said goodbye to the streets of the city, covered in rubble and smoke, and with them, to a part of my heart. I didn't know if I would return, but I was sure that displacement is not just a physical relocation – it means losing your roots, your memories and your sense of self. That day taught me that displacement leaves traces not only on your feet, but above all in your heart.

It was difficult for us to find a place to spend our first night. We ended up in a car garage with a cold floor that resembled neither a house nor a shelter. We were just looking for a corner that would protect us from the night.

We also managed to fill the water barrel we had brought with us from Gaza City. It was a precious treasure we were transporting between fear and hope. But at midnight, as we tried to catch our breath after a long, exhausting day, the barrel suddenly exploded. I don't know how or why, but the water shot out and flooded everything: clothes, blankets, mattresses, the warmth we had tried to create.

The grease and oil that stuck to the garage floor mixed with our clean clothes and rendered them unusable. We sat there for a long time that night and cried – more out of helplessness than pain. Our first night in exile was bitter and painful – far away from our beloved city, drowning in the only water we had.

I'M AFRAID TO HOPE

When negotiations resumed and there was talk of a ceasefire or temporary truce, I followed every news report with great anxiety and caution. I no longer trust so easily. I

became afraid of hope itself, as if it had become a new trap. They disappointed us so much, playing with our feelings over and over again, until we no longer believed in anything.

We were afraid to believe, because believing meant being disappointed again, being broken again, when we could barely stand on our feet. When the ceasefire was announced, we felt nothing. We had lost our ability to feel joy, just as we had lost everything else before. What came over us was not reassurance, but a quiet fear that the war would return at any moment and devour what was left of us.

This article was published in cooperation with [@Egab](#).



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HEALTH

“What other option do we have?”

US President Donald Trump's decision to freeze foreign aid has restricted access to HIV therapies in South Africa, particularly for undocumented migrants and other marginalised people. A dangerous black market has sprung up as a result.

BY RAY MWAREYA



An HIV-positive sex worker in Johannesburg holds antiretroviral drugs provided to her by the government. However, many sex workers now have to rely on the black market to obtain these drugs.

Erica Mbambu (name changed) is a 31-year-old undocumented immigrant to South Africa from neighbouring Zimbabwe. She supports herself by performing sex work in the illegal brothels of Johannesburg, South Africa's commercial capital. She is HIV positive.

For a decade, she managed her disease by taking the free antiretroviral pills that South Africa's public clinics gave out to anyone in the country who was living with HIV – whether they were a citizen, legalised resident or undocumented foreign worker.

“For people like me, South Africa was the country where you could arrive today, get tested for free tomorrow, and start taking antiretroviral medication within a week,” she says. But this year, that system has broken down.

“The Trump administration’s decision could result in as many as an additional 565,000 new HIV infections and 601,000 HIV-related deaths in South Africa by 2034.”

THE LARGEST EPIDEMIC IN THE WORLD

South Africa has the largest HIV epidemic in the world. Nevertheless, the country, along with neighbouring Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi, has made remarkable gains in recent years in reducing deaths and new infections. Last year, South Africa's treatment programme – the world's largest – supplied antiretroviral therapy (ART) to approximately 6 million of the 7.8 million South Africans who were known to have HIV. Often delivered in pill form, ART lowers the levels of the HI virus in the body and reduces the likelihood of a patient developing the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) from it.

The United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) programme has invested \$ 8 billion in South Africa since its launch in 2003. Last year, the US contributed over \$ 450 million to fight HIV in South Africa.

For two decades, South Africa's public hospitals have been able to provide ART to people like Erica Mbambu for free.

Since 2016, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which prevents HIV infections in the first place, has been available as well.

Like Mbambu, Irene Jani, a 28-year-old undocumented migrant from Malawi, performs sex work in a slum in Johannesburg. She has sex without a condom with clients who pay higher prices, but so far has been able to avoid an HIV infection thanks to a free PrEP drug funded in large part by the US government.

In January of this year, however, Donald Trump signed an executive order halting all foreign aid, including funding for PEPFAR and USAID programmes.

The results of the funding freeze have been devastating for South Africa: Over 8000 health workers have lost their jobs, clinics have closed, treatment has been disrupted, and essential research has been shut down.

MEDICAL XENOPHOBIA

Unsurprisingly, the cuts have hit marginalised people like Erica Mbambu and Irene Jani the hardest. Discriminatory attitudes towards undocumented migrants are exacerbating the problem. “Nurses refuse us pills now,” Erica Mbambu says. “They cite Trump and say that the medications that are left are reserved for South African citizens and legalised foreign workers.” Irene Jani can also no longer obtain her prophylactic drug at the clinics she has access to.

To make matters worse, the anti-immigration group “Operation Dudula” has been blocking entrances to some public hospitals and chasing off undocumented migrants seeking all types of medical care, from pregnancy monitoring to HIV treatment to malaria diagnoses. “Operation Dudula” means “Operation Force Out” in the dominant isiZulu language.

It is not the official policy of the South African government to deny HIV treatment to undocumented foreign nationals, and “any South African blocking hospital premises to cut off patients from critical care faces arrest,” says Sandile Buthelezi, the director-general of the National Department of Health.

But the director's reassuring words are hot air, says Tino Hwakandwe, an advocacy manager with the Zimbabwe Refugee Alliance in South Africa's capital Pretoria. “Nurses are telling undocumented migrants to get treated in their home countries. Then they sell them HIV medication under the table,” he says.

A DANGEROUS BLACK MARKET

Erica Mbambu has resorted to bribing healthcare professionals for her pills. “I pay bribes because I don't want

to die early from untreated AIDS,” she says. “My kids depend on me.”

Irene Jani, on the other hand, is buying drugs that have been smuggled across the border from Malawi, 1500 kilometres away. The pills are then sold on the street for about \$ 30 for a month’s supply. “The medication is stolen from dispensaries in Malawi by public hospital nurses because healthcare workers over there are paid so little,” Jani explains. Her source is precarious, however: Malawian clinics also rely on funding from USAID.

Taking HIV drugs without medical supervision is “a dance with disaster,” says Ndiviwe Mphothulo, president of the Southern African HIV Clinicians Society. “Fake HIV drugs could sneak onto the market and amplify drug-resistant strains of syphilis, HIV or gonorrhoea. People taking these drugs without baseline liver and kidney tests are risking organ injury.”

Jani feels uneasy taking black market drugs, but she has no choice if she wants to stay HIV-free. Mbambu faces the same dilemma, asking, “What other option do we have?”

In an analysis of the impact of the PEPFAR cuts, Linda-Gail Bekker, a prominent South African HIV expert, warned along with her co-authors that the Trump administration’s decision could result in “as many as an additional 565,000 new HIV infections and 601,000 HIV-related deaths in South Africa by 2034”. The permanent loss of US funding could undo decades of progress; the current freeze is already threatening the lives of South Africa’s most vulnerable residents.



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Photo: Agather Atuhaire



Ugandan activist and lawyer Agather Atuhaire.

STATE REPRESSION

“Not even a criminal should be treated this way”

In May, Ugandan lawyer and activist Agather Atuhaire was abducted in Tanzania. Days later, she was found near the Ugandan border and gave a harrowing account of her ordeal. In this interview, she speaks about the trauma of state repression, the shortcomings of symbolic women's leadership, the strength she draws from family and solidarity and the shrinking international support that has emboldened authoritarianism.

Several months have passed since Agather Atuhaire and Kenyan activist Boniface Mwangi were abducted by Tanzanian security agents while visiting Tanzania to observe the treason trial of opposition leader Tundu Lissu. Together with Mwangi, Atuhaire has decided to speak publicly about the treatment they experienced during their detention. During a press conference attended by international media in June, they accused the authorities of physical and sexual torture, including rape. Their accounts are supported by documentation from international human-rights organisations and are central to a legal case currently before the East African Court of Justice. Shortly after the abduction, Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan stated publicly that she would not tolerate foreign activists “invading” and destabilising the country. Mwangi and Atuhaire are suing the government of Tanzania for its alleged involvement. The government denies the accusations.

Tanzania has traditionally been seen by Ugandans as a hospitable country with a progressive constitution. However, the human-rights situation across East Africa has deteriorated significantly. High-profile Ugandan opposition leaders, including Kizza Besigye – who was detained while visiting Kenya – have also been targets of cross-border abductions and intimidation. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni recently confirmed that two Kenyan activists who had been missing in his country for five weeks had been arrested.

These incidents underscore a broader pattern of repression in the region. Tanzania is in turmoil following elections that, according to the African Union, failed to meet democratic standards. Widespread violence has erupted, with hundreds feared dead. In Kenya, dozens of people have fallen victim to police brutality during anti-government protests for the second consecutive year. In Uganda, restrictions on free speech and assembly have persisted for decades. Journalists frequently face violence, arbitrary detention and legal harassment. According to the 2025 World Press Freedom Index, Uganda ranks 143rd out of 180 countries, Kenya 117th and Tanzania 95th.

Your work as a journalist, lawyer and activist has focused on advancing human rights, public accountability and social justice. Working in solidarity with others, you have helped amplify the voices of marginalised communities. How has your recent traumatic experience of violence in Tanzania changed your perspective on activism and justice?

First of all, it was extremely traumatising. The most traumatising part is – you didn’t even do anything, and yet nothing is done about it. Not even a criminal should be treated this way, there should be laws and due process. Afterwards, I struggled with the sense of powerlessness. There were no consequences, no accountability. People inflict pain and go about their business while victims are left injured and distressed. The only hope was that our ordeal would save others without a platform or voice. But even with a platform, nothing changed, which was shocking and discouraging. There’s much I admire about the cultures of Uganda and Tanzania, but this ordeal revealed just how deeply violence and impunity are embedded in their systems. A friend told me that what happened to us was “business as usual” for Tanzanians, which made me realise the scale of the problem. Our ordeal convinced me of the importance of exposing the reality of Tanzania – particularly the actions of President Samia Suluhu Hassan. She came to power as a symbol of hope for marginalised communities, yet she has failed to represent or protect them. She rules like a dictator.

What is your perspective on President Hassan as a female leader?

I don’t believe in celebrating a woman’s rise to power just for the sake of representation. When I criticise abusive women leaders, I get pushback – even from men saying we should just celebrate women in power. But that is not enough. What matters to me is whether they uphold women’s rights and challenge systemic abuse. In President Hassan’s case, I see little evidence of that. Her approach doesn’t address women’s issues meaningfully and stays within patriarchal norms and practices. Her response to criticism has been disappointing as well. Instead of addressing legal violations through proper channels, she

“I don’t believe in celebrating a woman’s rise to power just for the sake of representation.”

admitted to administrative wrongdoing but deflected responsibility by blaming external actors. This reflects a broader pattern across Africa, where women in leadership positions often replicate existing patriarchal structures. We have women in key positions, but very few are reformers. Many simply continue with abuse or corruption, and that's not real progress for women.

Your family pursued every possible avenue to persuade the Ugandan government to issue a formal inquiry into your disappearance. The Ugandan High Commission then sent a request to Tanzania's Criminal Investigation Department. How did your family cope with what happened to you?

I wanted to keep my family out of it, but they suffered the most, especially during the time I was missing. My sister came close to breaking down. My elderly mother, who lives in a village, had to be shielded from the full details of what happened. My youngest son suffered health issues afterwards. He was ill for months, and doctors linked it to stress-related immune issues. My family supported me, and part of my healing involves being close to them – making sure they feel safe again. My children do not fully understand my activism. For them, it's about seeing their mother treated unfairly. They do not necessarily grasp the entire context.

“The international community seems less interested in African human rights.”

Uganda's foreign policy has faced criticism for its lack of effective mechanisms to protect citizens abroad and for its ambiguous use of regional frameworks in addressing injustices. Diplomatic gestures – such as the Ugandan High Commissioner hosting Tanzania's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation in Dar es Salaam to celebrate “regional bonds” – seem to have taken precedence, with no mention of your case. Do you feel the Ugan-



dan government has supported you? And what does justice mean to you now?

Up to now, I have not been contacted by the government regarding what happened to me. Justice, in these circumstances, becomes a personal process. Institutional justice is rare, so you learn to find meaning in the steps you can take on your own. It's difficult, sometimes depressing, to weigh up whether exposing criminals is worth the personal risk. Actions do not always spark solidarity. Not everyone cares or agrees. But I continue to do my bit, because staying silent would make me complicit.

I don't expect legal redress through domestic institutions. They are too compromised. Still, we have initiated a formal case before the East African Court of Justice and are currently awaiting the court's hearing date. Although these processes take a long time and are mostly symbolic, they are necessary before you can take cases to international platforms like the UN.

What role does the international community play?

The international community seems less interested in African human rights; priorities have shifted to trade and eco-

nomics. Africa today is a battleground for influence between the West, China and Russia. Neither China nor Russia show any interest in human rights; their engagement is purely transactional. At the same time, Western funding for democracy and civil society has dropped, and local activists face new transnational threats. Rights defenders are much less safe than before, now that international scrutiny has declined.

Kenyan activists played a key role in publicising your abduction, while civil society in Uganda remained largely silent. To this day, neither the Uganda Human Rights Commission nor the Uganda Law Society – of which you are a member – has issued any public statement of solidarity. What does this say about the state of civil society in Uganda? Are there active movements?

There is a civil society presence in Uganda, but it doesn't always take a formal shape. What we have is more of an organic movement – people connect informally, attend meetings, and the network grows naturally. We've discussed formalising and raising funds, but for now, it's informal and still impactful. I've seen real progress over the past two years, especially through social media. What used to be a space for casual conversations has become a powerful tool for organisation and public education. It's particularly effective among young people. The focus is now on sharing accurate information and engaging people in a way that transforms them from passive observers into active participants.



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EMPOWERMENT

How India's young women reclaim safety and confidence

In India, the movement Red Brigade teaches girls to defend themselves and lead their communities. What began as self-defence has grown into a nationwide call for women's safety, confidence and leadership.

BY ROLI MAHAJAN

When Shruti, a frail 17-year-old schoolgirl, arrived at a three-day self-defense training in Lonavala, a town in the Indian state Maharashtra, she was burdened by self-doubt. Her family had long dismissed her as weak, and she believed it too. Quiet on the first day, she slowly began to engage. By the final session, she had practiced all the self-defence moves confidently and had also proclaimed: “What other girls sitting here can do, I can also do.”

Only days earlier, she had fainted at school. Now she stood tall before her peers. In many ways, she embodies the mission of the popular Indian movement and civil-society organisation Red Brigade Lucknow: transforming fear into faith and silence into strength. Based in Lucknow, India, the organisation empowers women through self-defence education.

Red Brigade was founded in 2011 by Usha Vishwakarma, after she survived an attempted rape. What began as an act of defiance and healing – in the beginning, 15 young women performed street plays on abuse and harassment – evolved into a powerful movement for women’s security and dignity in India.

The group’s work took on new urgency after the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, as women across India sought ways to protect and empower themselves. That’s when Red Brigade expanded its mission from protests to structured training programmes, creating space for physical and psychological recovery.

In India, gender-based violence remains widespread and women are often silenced by social and cultural norms. According to data collected between 2019 and 2021, almost one in three women has experienced physical or sexual violence, and many girls still grow up being told to stay quiet or stay home. In such a reality, teaching self-defence is not only about personal protection but also about reclaiming confidence and dignity as women.

LEARNING HOW TO FIGHT

During Red Brigade’s sessions, it became clear that conventional self-defence methods often failed real survivors. The group therefore developed Nishastr Kala, a technique focused on survival within seconds of an attack. Co-created with women who had experienced violence and martial arts experts from India, France and Aus-

Violence against women is a recurring issue in India. In August, protesters took to the streets in Kolkata after a young female doctor was raped and killed.



tralia, this approach prioritises realism over ritual. Since then, more than 250,000 girls in schools and villages have been trained, learning not only how to fight, but how to believe in their own resilience.

Over time, Vishwakarma realised that safety alone could not dismantle entrenched gender hierarchies. “Protection is the first step,” she says, “but if women do not sit where decisions are made, nothing really changes.”

This conviction led to the creation of Veerangana Vahini – an “army of brave women” focused on cultivating young female leaders. Operating in 20 districts across Uttar Pradesh, one of India’s most challenging states for gender equality, the organisation engages women aged 18 to 25 in discussions about safety, education, independence and governance. These dialogues, Vishwakarma believes, are the seedbed of transformation: “Only when discussion deepens do thoughts begin to grow.”

The impact is already visible. At a leadership summit earlier this year, more than a thousand young women from across the state declared, “I am ready to lead.” Some, from farming families, Dalit communities and other marginalised castes, now aspire to become Pradhan, the village head, or Members of the Legislative Assembly, both roles long dominated by men.

The movement is also challenging the grip of the Pradhan Pati, the “unelected husbands” who often hold power behind the scenes and exercise unofficial authority, thereby undermining the leadership role of their wives who have been elected as village chiefs. In one village, a young Dalit girl’s speech inspired the local female Pradhan to demand accountability from her husband. Soon after, he stormed into the organisers’ office, asking furiously, “What are you teaching my wife?”

What Veerangana Vahini is teaching, it seems, is simple yet radical: when women hold the seat of power, their decisions must lead.



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Po.Box PPTE.cm by
Jean David Nkot (see p. 4).

What does
it mean to
be a man?

OUR VIEW

Breaking out of rigid male roles

The traditional image of the dominant man causes enormous damage, but it is currently experiencing a renaissance. At the same time, more men worldwide are advocating for equal rights and less rigid gender roles. Both sexes stand to benefit from more gender equality.

BY JÖRG DÖBEREINER

In 2025, “This is a man’s world” is still a true statement. Men still have significantly more financial resources and political power than women, possess over \$100 trillion more in wealth, according to Oxfam, and occupy almost three quarters of seats in national parliaments according to the UN. Women’s political influence is increasing, but at a snail’s pace, while many men are defending their own privileges tooth and nail.

In some places, patriarchy is even regaining ground, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned recently. That trend includes strongmen like Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, who deliberately link the image of the dominant man to nationalist politics to justify their authoritarian actions. Young men are radicalising themselves online in the “manosphere”, a scene characterised by misogyny and fantasies of dominance.

“It’s time we men understood that greater equality benefits not just our wives and daughters, but also our sons and ourselves.”

All of these factors make it more likely that men will become perpetrators, and it is primarily women who suffer. According to the WHO, approximately every third woman worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partners or other men. The problem is serious and widespread, both in poorer and in richer countries. Too few men declare solidarity with women in the spirit of “male allyship” and support them in their struggle for equal rights.

Many men also pay a high price in our patriarchal societies. They have been assigned the role of the mentally and physically unassailable provider and protector, and those

who can’t fulfil it face social exclusion in many places. No small number of men buckle under the pressure. They too rarely seek or find help and instead resort to addiction or aggression.

The ability to admit weakness and take responsibility for one’s own health is a strength – but traditional notions of masculinity don’t see it that way. Yet all humans are vulnerable, including men. That may seem obvious, but unfortunately it will have to keep being repeated as long as patriarchal expectations prevail.

WHY WE NEED MORE FREEDOM

It’s time we men understood that greater equality benefits not just our wives and daughters, but also our sons and ourselves. Our authors’ research in this issue shows how men from Kenya to Mexico and from Uganda to Germany are striving to fulfil their work and family roles differently than their fathers and grandfathers did.

Women still need more rights, opportunities for participation, access to resources like land and wages and, not least, more protection from male violence. Both men and women need less narrow social roles. Both should, whenever possible, be able to choose the family and career paths that suit them. The good news is that equal rights are not a zero-sum game. More freedom for one gender also means more freedom for the other.



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MENTAL HEALTH

Why men in Africa — and elsewhere — should help end patriarchy

Patriarchy grants men privileges, but it also comes with norms and expectations that inflict serious harm on their mental and physical health. Oluyinka Ojedokun, professor of psychology in Nigeria and South Africa, explains why it is in African men's interests to actively participate in redefining masculinity: not merely to promote gender equality for women's sake, but also to improve their own individual and collective wellbeing.

BY OLUYINKA OJEDOKUN



Men and women are protesting against gender-based violence together in Pretoria, South Africa, in April 2025.

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Themba Hadebe

It is well known that patriarchy preserves inequality by privileging men while marginalising women. In patriarchal societies, men are more likely than women to hold political power and accumulate wealth. They perpetuate violence against women and do not face some of the daily threats that women and children do.

However, the very patriarchal structures that afford men privileges also inflict harm on them. This can be observed in many African countries, where patriarchal societies are still deeply rooted. Men are socialised to believe for example that masculinity is defined by silence, stoicism and endurance. They often internalise expectations that they should be dominant, successful and unemotional, as well as physically and mentally strong. Consequently, men of a patriarchal orientation in Africa – and other places around the world – often tend to act recklessly, aggressively and fearlessly. They often neglect to seek help, adopt behaviours that pose a risk to their health, suppress intimacy and avoid deeper relationships.

“In cities from Lagos to Johannesburg, movements that once focused exclusively on gender-based violence and the lack of female empowerment are now also addressing the psychological costs of patriarchy for men.”

All of this can lead to numerous problems, such as

- men injuring themselves unnecessarily or even losing their life,
- men's basic human need for attachment being negatively affected,
- their being denied valuable experiences, such as the intimacy and deep affection to be found within a relationship.

African psychologists have investigated how internalising harmful masculine norms contributes to depression and discourages help-seeking (Ezeugwu and Ojedokun 2020). They have documented how the demand for emotional toughness isolates young men and undermines their well-being (Mogano et al. 2025). Behind their stoic facades and unemotional demeanour, many men in Africa and elsewhere thus carry invisible wounds that are born of patriarchal expectations.

QUESTIONING TRADITIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF MASCULINITY

While feminists have long been fighting against the patriarchy and highlighting its negative effects, many men are only just beginning to understand how it causes them to suffer, too. In fact, across Africa, a transformation is underway: social norms and communication habits are being challenged and deconstructed. Questioning patriarchy is no longer framed solely as a women's issue, but also as a way of freeing men from the emotional prisons built by patriarchy.

In cities from Lagos to Johannesburg, movements that once focused exclusively on gender-based violence and the lack of female empowerment are now also addressing the psychological costs of patriarchy for men. Campaigns like #MenAreTrash and Women Allying Women (WAW) have evolved into broader critiques of patriarchy, highlighting how rigid gender norms affect everyone, including men themselves. Films, advertisements, radio shows, podcasts and social media discussions – such as those posted under the hashtags #MenAreHumanToo and #EndToxic-Masculinity – increasingly portray men as emotionally complex individuals with mental health needs. Men themselves are discussing topics like vulnerability, mental health and fatherhood with unprecedented openness.

More and more people are advocating for a healthier understanding of masculinity that does not harm men, women, children or society as a whole. They highlight aspects such as vulnerability, care and the ability to acknowledge one's emotions. It is worth noting that these trends, rather than challenging men's sexuality or denying their manhood, are merely redefining masculinity.

Research has confirmed that the notion of masculinity is undergoing a shift in Africa. While many African men still feel pressure to conform to traditional provider roles, younger generations increasingly support gender equality, shared caregiving and emotional openness (Equimundo, IMAGES 2022). Earlier findings demonstrate that men who are exposed to equitable role models, through education or community engagement, report better mental health and stronger family relationships.

“From a psychological point of view, African men would be much better off without the disadvantages that patriarchy entails.”

A COLLECTIVE LIBERATION PROJECT

The recognition that men suffer from widespread misconceptions of masculinity does not diminish the structural privileges men hold in many societies. Rather, it helps explain why men too have a genuine stake in dismantling patriarchy. This endeavour is not merely a feminist demand, nor is it only about advancing justice for women and gender minorities. Instead, it can be thought of as a collective liberation project: freeing men and women alike from rigid systems that limit love, empathy and shared humanity.

But that is easier said than done. After all, there are powerful reasons why patriarchy has persisted in many African societies for so long. Even though African men have to pay a price for them, the privileges are immense. They still enjoy greater benefits than women in terms of pay, power and safety. For some, these advantages may obscure any harm caused. Others may even feel that the privileges outweigh the harm.

Nevertheless, from a psychological point of view, African men would be much better off without the disadvantages that patriarchy entails. Ending traditional patriarchal norms would give African men the freedom to express emotions without shame and to seek help without stigma, to be good fathers without compromise and to measure their worth in more than income or dominance. They would enjoy fuller, healthier and more connected lives.

Ultimately, if African men changed their conceptions of masculinity, they would contribute to a more just and liveable society for all. Societies with greater gender equality are more likely to witness lower rates of violence, higher levels of happiness and better health outcomes for all citizens, men included. In other words: gender equality is not a zero-sum game; it creates healthier and more sustainable societies.

A NEW VISION OF MASCULINITY

The challenge, then, is to redefine masculinity in ways that benefit men, women and society as a whole. Psychological

research suggests that new models of masculinity should emphasise emotional openness, mutual respect, caregiving and non-violence. These are not “unmanly” traits, they are human traits.

The good news is that the shift is moving in the right direction in many places in Africa. Apart from the changes in the discourse mentioned above, there are growing calls for paternity leave in workplaces, for instance – a very important step towards real gender equality.

However, cultural change tends to be uneven, and backlash movements in Africa and around the world are trying to reassert patriarchal ideals. African men’s active participation is therefore crucial. They must not leave the fight against patriarchy solely to African women. Instead, they should challenge peers who use sexist language, advocate for policies that support better childcare services and be role models for healthier forms of masculinity. Such efforts require courage, but also offer the reward of genuine connection, better health and a more just society.

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Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/David Azia

Men of the Didinga ethnic group face the challenge of combining traditional values with modern concepts.

EAST AFRICA

Young men between tradition and modernity

Strong and courageous providers and protectors — that's what men are supposed to be, according to the norms of the Didinga ethnic group in South Sudan. Young South Sudanese men face the challenge of reconciling such traditional ideas with modern concepts of masculinity.

BY ALBA NAKUWA

If you want to be taken seriously as a man among the Didinga, you can't be squeamish. "They smeared us with goat stomach waste," says Mark Lokulang, recalling the traditional initiation rite for boys aged 15 and older. The homeland of the Didinga ethnic group, whose culture is shaped by livestock farming, lies in the Didinga mountains in South Sudan, in the border triangle with Uganda and Kenya.

Like so many boys before him, the now 16-year-old grew up in a traditional age group classification system that determines what is expected of young males at each stage of their lives. Until the age of 12, boys are considered children who are still inexperienced in various areas of life. The initiation rite described by Mark Lokulang is a crucial step towards becoming a fully-fledged man. It usually lasts three days and takes place away from home in the woods. There, older men teach the adolescents the things expected of a Didinga man: making decisions, herding cattle, protecting their family and showing restraint.

"Mark Lokulang says that even today, the men in his community still tell him that a man must always be strong and brave and show no weakness."

These culturally embedded norms and practices have shaped the identity of Didinga men for generations and determined their place in the community. Mark Lokulang says that even today, the men in his community still tell him that a man must always be strong and brave and show no weakness. If cattle thieves try to steal his herd, he must fight for his cattle and defend his community, not run away.

Mark Lokulang is aware that other teenagers grow up very differently, he knows plenty of people who lead a more modern life in Kenya or Uganda. He himself attends a local secondary school and would like to work in the medical profession one day. For him, being a real man means being a fighter – in the sense not only of a warrior but also of fighting for the things that are important to him in his own life. He wants to use the knowledge he has acquired at school and elsewhere to broaden the traditional idea of what it means to be a "real man".

"James George points out that the gender norms of many South Sudanese communities place men at the centre of power and decision-making, while entrusting women with domestic chores."

COMBINING TRADITION AND PROGRESS

James George also underwent the initiation rite as a young Didinga. He then lived and studied in Kenya before returning to his homeland. Today, the 33-year-old works for the civil-society organisation Root Of Generations, which campaigns for women's rights. He is the area coordinator for the South Sudanese district of Budi, where the Didinga Mountains are located.

James George points out that many South Sudanese communities continue to be patriarchal. Their gender norms place men at the centre of power and decision-making, while entrusting women with domestic chores, he says.

"Our fathers taught us that a good man owns cattle and protects his family," he explains. "But today, being a man also means knowing how to create opportunities for oneself and others while resolving conflicts peacefully, taking into consideration the opinions of your sisters, mothers and partners."

"Muacha mila ni mtuumwa," says James George, quoting a Swahili proverb that means "One who abandons their traditions is a slave." For him, masculinity is rooted in history but open to renewal. The challenge, he says, is to grow without losing oneself – and he expresses the hope that future generations will succeed in combining tradition and progress.

A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

One person who is attempting to do just that is Daniel Bi-chiok. He too was born into a traditional value system – that of the Nuer, an ethnic group in which livestock farming also plays an important role. He came from what is now South Sudan to Kenya as a child and now plays professional football in the Premier League, the highest division.

“Daniel Bichiok does not want to choose one culture and reject the other but rather build a bridge between them — connecting his roots with the opportunity to lead a modern life.”

For Daniel Bichiok, his identity as a man is a daily balancing act between two worlds. In his home village, he says, he is expected to lead and provide for his family. In contrast, his modern life in Nairobi requires him to share tasks.

In Kenya, the captain of Nairobi United has learned that being a man is more about the ability to cooperate and adapt than about dominance. Nevertheless, he says, he often feels the pressure of expectations from his South Sudanese family, who consider his lifestyle too Kenyan. However, he does not want to choose one culture and reject the other but rather build a bridge between them — connecting his roots with the opportunity to lead a modern life.

But what is the female perspective on the changing image of masculinity? “In many African societies, a home without a man is seen as incomplete,” says Sunday Lino, a South Sudanese woman who lives and works in Kenya. In her home country, masculinity has always stood for protection and authority, says the 28-year-old. This idea of masculinity once held communities together, but at the same time limited women’s opportunities to take on leadership positions, she says.

“Real masculinity should not suppress,” says Sunday Lino. “It should protect the weak, not control them.” She confirms that ideas about masculinity are currently changing. Now, she says, it is up to the men in South Sudan, Kenya and elsewhere to decide for themselves how they want to express this new masculinity in their lives.



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FEMALE TRUCKERS IN MEXICO

The curse of the cliché

Driving a truck was long viewed as man's work in Mexico. It was presumed that only the "stronger sex" could handle the dangerous routes and long lonely shifts. Yet women are now breaking with these old stereotypes.

BY MONTSERRAT BUSTOS CARDONA



Photo: picture alliance/NurPhoto/Artur Widak

In Mexico, women are conquering the male-dominated field of truck driving: traffic in the state of Chiapas.

“Though women are still clearly in the minority in the transport industry, they have helped in recent years to bring about a new way of thinking about gender roles.”

For decades, the image that sprang to mind when people in Mexico imagined a truck driver was that of a tough, solitary and emotionally impenetrable Casanova behind the wheel. Covering thousands of miles under adverse conditions and enduring heat, sleep deprivation, hunger and violence on the roads seemed the ultimate expression of “a real man” – of the archetypal resilient and independent breadwinner. Indeed, the profession is one of the most male-dominated in all of Mexico.

This notion of masculinity is fraught with deep-seated conflicts, however. Armando Liceaga, a psychologist with the haulage firm Transportes Esteban (TES), says that unresolved emotional issues lie buried behind the facade: many truckers are desperate to ask for help or show their vulnerable side but lack the vocabulary to do so. In his experience it’s not unusual for men to have two or more families dotted around the country. He sees this as a driver’s dysfunctional way of seeking at least some solace after arduous days spent on the road – days characterised by an absence of any close ties and separation from loved ones.

According to René López Pérez, a model of male hegemony persists in Mexico that is based on authority, independence and suppressing emotions. Pérez is the research director at GENDES, an organisation specialised in masculinity studies. “From an early age, men are taught to deny any vulnerability and to be highly competitive,” he says. Socialised in this way, they are a good fit for the demands of the transport sector, where gruelling working days and long periods of isolation are the norm and drivers need to be able to tolerate risks and take decisions on their own, explains the expert.

GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR

This model kept women out of the game for a long time. Deeply rooted in Mexican culture, gender division of labour confined them to nursing, housework and the emotional sphere. Meanwhile, men took over those domains that required physical strength, a willingness to take risks and manual skills. The few women brave enough to enter such professions encountered a double hurdle: lack of access to professional technical training – and a corporate culture that viewed them as an anomaly.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the shortage of truck drivers and the desire of many women to be financially independent opened up new opportunities, and the proportion of women in the sector grew. According to Mexico’s statistics institute INEGI, women accounted for roughly 45 % of all employees in 2023, yet just under 21 % of those employed in transport, the postal service and warehousing were female. This ratio not only reflects how backward this sector is but highlights how much potential there is for inclusion.

Paola Moncada, chair of the Asociación de Mujeres Operadoras (Association of Female Cargo Vehicle Operators), points out that just four years ago neither vocational schools nor companies in Mexico had the infrastructure or necessary mindset to integrate women into the industry. The prevailing stereotypes perpetuated a view of women as being first and foremost a potential risk and possible distraction. Moncada says however that many women were eager to learn and proved they were able not only to meet but even exceed society’s expectations. She adds that some of these women now earn up to three times what they previously did in traditionally female professions, thereby improving their lives significantly.

PERSISTENT PROBLEMS

Substantial structural obstacles remain, however. They include the lack of safe rest areas, violence on the roads, rampant discrimination and opposition from male colleagues who perceive the presence of women as a threat. In some cases, female integration seems to be more about image than any genuine commitment to equality – for example when neither the corporate culture nor poor working conditions change in any significant way.

Though women are still clearly in the minority in the transport industry, they have helped in recent years to bring about a new way of thinking about gender roles. While some male truckers are increasingly accepting their female colleagues, others view the shift more as a loss of status: if they are no longer the sole providers and have to let women share their profession, what does being a man even mean now?

The researcher René López Pérez suspects that many men perceive the change as a threat. Stripping them of their traditional dominant role without ensuring any healthy process of adjustment can in his opinion spark resistance, resentment and even violence.

It's vital therefore not only to continue training and integrating women but also to create spaces in which men can redefine their role – be it in the workplace or in terms of their behaviour. Ultimately, it's a question of teaching men to cooperate with women as equals and be able to show their vulnerabilities without fear of losing face.

INCLUSION, RESPECT AND NEW ROLE MODELS

Don Urbano López Román, a trucker with more than 30 years of experience, embodies this transformation. "My daughter now drives her own truck; I taught her myself," he says, not without a certain pride. "I really admire women who have the guts to get behind the wheel of a big truck. It's respect and good preparation that count, not gender." His attitude is proof that change is possible.

Women are underrepresented or face prejudice in many other sectors, too. Alternative attitudes towards masculinity are urgently needed. However, it is worth going further and not only rethink masculinity, but also the gender representations that define us. In a world with more diverse identities and free from sexist role models, violence against female truckers — or women in any profession — would no longer exist.



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A traditional jumping dance is part of the Enkipaata ceremony, a Maasai male rite of passage that is still practised today.

Photo: picture alliance/ASSOCIATED PRESS/Brian Inganga

GENDER STUDIES

Evolving masculinities

The modern man is in crisis. In Kenya, as elsewhere in Africa, he clings to distorted versions of masculinity that tragically lead him into emotional incarceration. Indeed, though patriarchy promises freedom to men, it actually alienates them, pitting them against each other. Yet freedom is the ultimate goal for all humanity.

BY STEPHEN MUTIE

Masculinity in Kenya has undergone subtle shifts. Traditional views of masculinity as involving dominance, conquest and violence are gradually being replaced by new identities that see masculinity as tender, flexible and adaptable. These changes are influenced by shifting societal norms, economic pressures and a younger generation's desire for self-expression.

This gradual shift in masculinity can be traced to affirmative action policies introduced in Kenya from the 1990s to the 2000s, which challenged traditional male dominance and the associated expectations of men by improving women's access to opportunities, education and decision-making positions. These policies played a key role in exposing the violent and oppressive aspects of patriarchy and the way in which misogyny often supports and sustains rigid traditional masculine norms. It is through this vital exposure of patriarchy's oppression that feminist activism and male engagement in promoting gender equality have increased in Kenya.

“While some global influences promote more fluid masculinities, others spread forms of toxic masculinity as a counter-trend.”

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES AND GLOBAL INFLUENCES

However, recent social and economic changes, along with global influences, have both challenged and reinforced the evolving ideas of masculinity in Kenya. Agriculture is the backbone of Kenya's economy, and men have traditionally held roles such as the family's breadwinner. Providing food in Kenya has been used as a source of power, helping men acquire and maintain authority. This is changing, however. A struggling agricultural sector and economic uncertainty, characterised by high unemployment, have significantly affected Kenyan men's ability to be the primary providers at home. This has often led to feelings of inadequacy and is contributing to a crisis of masculinity where men disqualify themselves as “real men” in the traditional sense of the word.

This seemingly economic emasculation of the Kenyan man at home leads to a second point. Urbanisation is making it

more difficult for Kenyan men to provide for their families. Families have moved to towns where there are no large farms for agriculture. This has pushed both men and women into work in order to support the household, blurring the lines of who should provide.

Thirdly, there has been an increase in the educational and economic empowerment of women, which has equipped them with the right knowledge to confront existing patriarchal systems. However, this should not mask the fact that traditional masculine ideals still exist, often perpetuated by strong patriarchal structures, cultural practices such as dowry payments and political discussions that lament the emasculation of men. Such narratives concern the plight of male children in particular: this is often reflected in political and social discourse, where the supposed disappearance of boys is decried. It is claimed that positive discrimination disadvantages boys in education and the labour market, threatening their future role as providers and undermining the traditional patriarchal family structure.

Fourthly, global influences, especially through digital media, expose men to different forms of masculinity and promote more flexible identities. That said, these influences can also reinforce harmful hypermasculine ideals.

Indeed, societal expectations for men to be the main providers remain strong, causing anxiety when they are unable to fulfil this role. In response to threats to their status, some men adopt hypermasculine behaviour – such as aggression or substance abuse – in a bid to reclaim their dominance. Additionally, existing ideas about sexual identities continue to link masculinity with sexual conquest. This combination of challenges and traditional norms creates a dynamic and sometimes conflicting environment for Kenyan men. It emphasises the tension between evolving social realities and persistent traditional expectations.

MASCULINITIES AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The shifts in Kenyan masculinities significantly affect ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and empower women. These effects can be both helpful and limiting, creating a complex landscape for social change.

One key enabling factor is the rise of male allies in the fight for gender equality in Kenya. Some Kenyan men have recognised the limitations of traditional masculine ideals, especially the pressure of being the sole provider, and they are willing to share responsibilities at home and in relationships. This leads to increased male involvement in childcare and domestic tasks, fostering more equitable partnerships.

These evolving Kenyan masculinities have challenged the rigid gender stereotypes that have historically confined women to specific roles. When men challenge traditional norms of dominance, women have a chance to assume leadership roles, express their agency and engage more fully in public life without facing as much resistance from men. Again, when men acknowledge that traditional masculinity can harm their own wellbeing, contributing to stress, isolation and mental health issues, they can build empathy and gain a better understanding of the challenges women face. This shared recognition of systemic pressures has motivated collective action to dismantle oppressive gender norms for everyone.

CONSTRAINING EFFECTS: RESISTANCE AND REINFORCEMENT OF INEQUALITY

On the other hand, the evolution of masculinities in Kenya has also presented significant obstacles to gender equality and women's empowerment. Some men see the challenge to traditional roles as a loss of power and status, which leads to resistance and backlash against women's progress in Kenya. Regrettably, this has led to increased instances of gender-based violence, as some men have resorted to aggression to reclaim their perceived authority. Additionally, the "crisis of masculinity" faced by those unable to fulfil traditional provider roles has a tendency, ironically, to strengthen misogynistic beliefs, as men may blame women for their economic hardships or societal changes. This entrenches patriarchal views, with perceived threats to male identity leading to greater insistence on maintaining traditional hierarchies. While some global influences promote more fluid masculinities, others spread forms of "toxic masculinity" as a counter-trend that emphasise sexual dominance, aggression and the objectification of women.

Ultimately, the influence that changing masculinities have on gender equality and women's empowerment in Kenya varies. We find ourselves at a critical moment, where opportunities for positive change coexist with the risk of deep-rooted resistance, underscoring the importance of understanding these dynamics for effective interventions. Promoting positive and equitable masculinities in Kenya requires not only male roles to be redefined but also the entire gender framework to be fundamentally transformed for the benefit of all.

The observed challenges and shifts point to several effective and essential pathways along this transformative journey.

1. Gender-transformative education and awareness programmes are crucial and must start in early childhood. These initiatives must actively challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes by engaging both boys and girls in thoughtful discussions about traditional gender roles.

Such programmes should be part of formal education and extend to community dialogues. They can use platforms such as faith-based organisations and youth networks to create safe spaces for men to talk about vulnerabilities, mental health and the societal pressures of outdated masculine ideals. This includes encouraging empathy, accountability and respectful partnerships.

2. It is critical to address the socio-economic roots of male disempowerment. Strategies should focus on empowering men economically by providing them with the skills and opportunities to contribute to their households and communities in various ways, moving beyond just being "provider." When men feel economically stable and valued, they are less likely to resort to harmful coping mechanisms or resist women's progress. Additionally, promoting shared domestic and caregiving responsibilities within families through active male participation can redefine what it means to be a "man" at home, fostering fairer relationships and easing the burden on women.
3. Effective strategies should employ a multi-stakeholder and intersectional approach. This involves working with men's groups, women's rights organisations, community leaders and policymakers to develop comprehensive interventions that take into account the diverse experiences of men and boys across different ages, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. Policy reforms, including those from affirmative action, must be carefully examined to ensure they genuinely promote gender equality without causing unintended backlash. By fostering positive role models, encouraging respectful online behaviour and consistently demonstrating the mutual benefits of gender equality for both men and women, not only Kenya can build a more just society where masculinities are defined by equity, respect and shared responsibility.



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Photo: Brian Otieno



A “strong man” can also have a loving relationship with his children.

GENDER ROLES

Why incomes rise when men carry the baby too

At his university in Uganda, Godfrey Mukalazi was the only man to focus on gender studies. Today, he offers gender training for married couples. He addresses relationship issues as well as family finances.

GODFREY MUKALAZI IN AN INTERVIEW WITH MONIKA HOEGEN

Godfrey Mukalazi, Ugandan society still has very traditional gender roles. How are men's roles usually understood?

Traditionally, men are the heads of the household and the breadwinners. Village communities tend to be just as patriarchal as families. There are regional differences, but most leadership positions are held by men.

Against this backdrop, your choice of studies was very unusual. You studied social sciences at Makerere University in Kampala with a focus on "Women and Gender Studies". How did your family and friends react when you told them?

Some were shocked; others laughed at me. "That's just for women," they said. And it's true that all of my classmates at the university were women. In Uganda, most people think that gender is a topic that only concerns women and that men have nothing to do with it. But I didn't let myself get discouraged because I'm very passionate about the issue of gender.

Where does this passion come from?

I am firmly convinced that cultivating better gender relations would improve life in Uganda in very concrete ways.

That's exactly what I want to communicate. Gender is not a "women's issue", but something that affects us all.

You now work as a gender expert for the TeamUp project (see below). TeamUp wants to improve living conditions for Ugandan youth in poorer rural areas, particularly in the coffee-growing regions of central Uganda. What does your work look like?

The first goal is to incorporate the gender perspective into all of TeamUp's focus areas – whether it's sustainable agriculture, income generation, reproductive health or water and sanitation. As a trainer, I also educate young men and women using the so-called "household approach". It teaches partners to communicate better and make decisions about important aspects of their lives together – and no longer stay in fixed roles, like people often do in a traditional marriage. Our training turns participants into "change agents" who can offer advice to others in their village communities in turn.

How exactly do you design training like that?

It's very important not to assign blame – not even to the men – but to work with understanding. Often married couples think that the other person isn't doing anything.



Godfrey Mukalazi at a gender training in the village of Bukooki in central Uganda.

“Many of our men who were raised traditionally are still more likely to listen to a man than to a woman.”

Photo: Brian Otieno

But when we compare their to-do lists, we see that both people are doing their part – without knowing or noticing what the other is contributing. We have to break this pattern to foster more mutual respect. It also helps to take a humorous approach.

You work with cartoons, funny photos and role plays that turn the tables on both men and women. How is all that received?

Our participants are very amused at first – like when we encourage men to carry a small child on their backs in a sling, which usually only women do in Uganda. Sometimes the men resist. But I try to make it clear that you can still be a strong man even if you carry your baby and develop a new, more loving relationship with your children.

TeamUp believes that developing a new perspective on gender roles and sharing household responsibilities more equally can do more than revitalise the relationship. The couple's income can increase too. How?

Traditionally, men are responsible for the family's income. Women are supposed to stay at home and cannot and should not contribute. But that usually just makes people poorer. I remember that when I was young, my father once got stuck in the jungle for a long time during an excursion. In order to keep us from starving, my mother – bucking tradition – accepted a couple of small jobs. When my father came back, he was impressed by her courage and what she had been able to achieve. He then supported her efforts to open a small shop. From that point on, our family started doing better than it ever had before.

Are the men always so easy to convince, and is it always so easy to dispel clichés about traditional gender roles?

No. We can't expect change to come quickly here. We have to be patient. Our "change agents", who have a good understanding of the dynamics in their families, communities and villages, help us move forward carefully.

Do you believe that this approach will succeed and that gender relations will change in Uganda in the long term?

Yes, one hundred percent. By addressing gender issues and advocating for more equality, we are going to the heart of families and communities. That's how we can develop the social and economic potential of our society for the benefit of us all. But there are still too few training courses and projects on this topic.

You and the other TeamUp gender experts are all men. Why aren't more women doing this work?

"Gender is not a 'women's issue', but something that affects us all."

Many of our men who were raised traditionally are still more likely to listen to a man than to a woman. Male participants often approach me after a training course and tell me that they were surprised at first to learn something about gender from a man. But at the same time, they were more willing to accept advice that came from "one of their own".

We spoke with Godfrey Mukalazi following one of his gender training courses in the village of Bukooki, located in the central Ugandan province of Kassanda, 120 kilometres from Kampala. The "TeamUp" project, which Godfrey Mukalazi works for, is a multi-stakeholder initiative funded by the Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung (HRNS), the Siemens Stiftung and the Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung (DSW) and supported by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.



GODFREY MUKALAZI

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teamupug.org

Photo: Brian Otieno



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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

“A new masculinity should allow relationships based on respect”

In Bolivia, the civil-society organisation Centro Juana Azurduy campaigns for gender equality – and to this end also works with men charged with violence against women. Therapy teaches them new ways of viewing gender roles that don't involve violence.

MARTHA NOYA IN AN INTERVIEW WITH BETTY ROSA CHOQUE

Ms Noya, you run the Centro Juana Azurduy (CJA) in Sucre, where you campaign in particular against violence against women. This is a massive problem: according to UNFPA, one in three women aged between 15 and 49 in Bolivia has already experienced gender-based violence. What part do perceptions of gender roles play in this?

Women have the right to a life without violence. However, our society fails to grant them this right because relationships between men and women in Bolivia are totally unbalanced: we see relationships characterised by oppression and subjugation. This is the result of gender stereotypes defining male and female identity. These are rooted in the patriarchal and colonial system of oppression.

So, what does characterise male and female identity in our society?

Female identity is based on subordination and an emotional, material and economic dependence on men. By contrast, male identity is associated with the idea of being a leader upon whom others depend, a leader who takes decisions and has power. This historic construct is hundreds of years old, even if it has changed over time.

“Men must understand that they have no inherent claim to their power and privileges, that these are in fact social constructs that can and must be changed.”

What has changed?

Women nowadays are no longer the property of men. They can take their own political and economic decisions and also have access to spheres of power. Nonetheless, they are still dependent in so many ways – including emotionally, economically and politically. Until women have complete autonomy over their lives, their bodies and their decisions, we will remain stuck in this structure of inequality.

“Men and women alike must challenge and unlearn macho behaviours and values.”

What should men do in this context?

From a feminist perspective, we believe it will be very difficult to bring about genuine change in gender relationships unless male identity is deconstructed and men adopt this transformation process for themselves. That's why we talk about creating a new masculinity that is not suppressive, aggressive or violent – and not defined by the feeling of having power over women. This power is so

far-reaching that it poses a threat to the female psyche and to women's lives. A new masculinity should allow relationships based on gender equality and respect, relationships that are free from violence.

The CJA has been working towards this goal for a long time. In all these years, have you noted any changes to the image of masculinity in Bolivian society?

Though there have been changes in some cases, it's very difficult to achieve sweeping societal change. But yes, our work is bearing fruit. Because we work with male offenders, we are in a good position to measure the impact. We cooperate with regional law-enforcement agencies: they send us men who have been charged with committing violence against women. They then undergo a course of psychotherapy at our centre.

Why therapy?

Legally speaking, a man accused of domestic violence can have his trial or sentence suspended under certain condi-



Photo: Nicholas Holmann

Martha Noya from the Centro Juana Azurduy at the launch of a campaign against psychological violence.

“At the end of their therapy, one hundred percent of the men do acknowledge that they exhibit macho behaviour, and some of them are prepared to change this.”

tions. One of these conditions is a course of psychotherapy. The goal is for offenders to learn to control their anger. They are encouraged to understand that their violent behaviour is part of the hegemonic masculinity construct. They are supposed to acknowledge that they are offenders because they are men and because they believe that women are inferior. We teach them that they need to change this mindset in order to be able to have more healthy relationships.

That’s an ambitious goal. How do you proceed?

The course of therapy comprises ten group sessions and ten individual sessions with each participant. A test is conducted both before and after the process to determine the extent to which the men understand the problem and are willing to admit their violent attitudes. It’s hard to gauge any far-reaching changes because behavioural shifts only become evident over time. However, what we can say is that one hundred percent of the men do acknowledge at the end of their therapy that they exhibit macho behaviour and that some of them are prepared to change this.

The therapy offered to offenders is just one part of CJA’s work. Your overriding objective is to reduce discrimination against women. How do these two elements fit together?

We believe that overcoming patriarchy means dismantling the mental, social, cultural and institutional structures that perpetuate the power of men over women. It’s not only about changing laws or discourse. It’s about making changes in daily life, in family relationships and in mindsets that are deeply rooted in society. All of us were socialised in a patriarchal system, so men and women alike must challenge and unlearn macho behaviours and values.

As well as rejecting patriarchy, you also believe decolonisation is important. How are the two related?

The patriarchy didn’t come out of nowhere: it came with colonisation. It imposed on us a view of the world in which white Western males were superior. When we talk of decolonisation, we mean returning to our own cultures, lan-

guages and ways of life – and to the relationship forms that existed among Indigenous Peoples before colonisation. Those societies were based for example on the principle of male-female complementarity, not of subordination. When working with violent offenders, we address the issues of depatriarchalisation and decolonisation in parallel. Men must understand that they have no inherent claim to their power and privileges, that these are in fact social constructs that can and must be changed. This will serve to liberate not only women but also men. The new masculinity will enable them to become more humane and sensitive and free themselves of the compulsion to be violent and dominant. Once they realise the extent to which machismo dictates their lives, this will open up the possibility for genuine change.



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[Centro Juana Azurduy – Empoderar para despatriarcalizar](#)



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SEXUALISED VIOLENCE AGAINST BOYS AND MEN

The Baby Reindeer effect

Men experience stalking, assaults and relationship violence too, but they rarely seek and find help. Series like “Baby Reindeer” challenge clichés, and new initiatives are trying to reach young people online, like on the gaming platform Twitch.

BY SONJA PETERANDERL



Photo: picture alliance/Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP/Chris Pizzello

Scottish comedian Richard Gadd (centre) addresses his own experiences of sexualised violence in his miniseries “Baby Reindeer”.

When he didn't want to have sex with her, she mocked him and attacked his masculinity. "She thought that a man had to want sex and always be available," says Max, whose name has been changed. When he tried to pull away, his ex-girlfriend called him a "wuss". She knew the passwords to his social media profiles; every time they met, she would take his smartphone and comb through his messages and photos. Once she even slapped him in front of her parents. "I felt powerless, used and drained," explains the student, who lives in Germany. He says he never thought of asking for help. He rarely talked about his relationship even with his friends.

Max says he was ashamed of letting himself be insulted and attacked. For a long time, he didn't fully realise that he was experiencing relationship violence. He believed he was "emotionally dependent". The psychologist Björn Sufke, who specialises in treating men, explains that these feelings are common. Cliches often distort survivors' understanding of their own violent experiences. Media depictions and pop culture also shape a society's ideas about sexualised violence – including what a typical "victim" looks like. "Men are perpetrators, women are victims," says Sufke, summarising the common view.

It's true that women are much more likely to experience stalking and relationship violence – all too often with deadly results. According to the United Nations, in 2023, a woman was murdered somewhere in the world approximately every ten minutes, usually by a partner, ex-partner or family member.

But boys and men experience sexualised violence, stalking and relationship violence too, at the hands of both men and women. There are still far too few narratives that reflect this reality and allow survivors to recognise themselves. One of them is the British series "Baby Reindeer", released on Netflix in 2024, in which the Scottish comedian, actor and screenwriter Richard Gadd processes how he was stalked by a woman and sexually abused by a man.

MORE MEN ARE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

In Great Britain last year, the series triggered a "Baby Reindeer" effect: After the show began streaming, significantly more young men turned to help centres for men affected by violence. "Baby Reindeer" also illustrates how difficult it is to set boundaries in intrusive relationships – because survivors had a good relationship with the person at first, they inaccurately assess risks, they have good experiences as well as bad, they're afraid of the consequences or they don't want to hurt the other person.

"Jeremy Indika's digital initiative, 'Something to say', offers a platform to people who were abused as children or adolescents. They show their faces as a way to break the silence surrounding child abuse."

"The series is creative, and I think it's good that the issue is receiving more attention in the media and pop culture," says Max, who needed three years to free himself from his ex-girlfriend. "There should be more shows like it." He doesn't think that violent experiences always necessarily have to play the starring role, like in "Baby Reindeer"; it would also be helpful, in his opinion, if stalking or relationship violence against men featured in side plots or individual scenes in movies.

The Netflix series inspired many discussions and touched many people. "I felt completely exposed, like someone had dug out all my secrets, stripped me naked (...), and put me in the middle of a full stadium," one user of the online platform Reddit said of his experience watching "Baby Reindeer" with friends. "If I were alone, I would have bawled my eyes out and curled up into a ball, but I just sat there and pretended it just slightly bothered me." It was difficult for him to talk about his problems, admit things, truly open up. "Baby Reindeer", he believes, influenced many men who share his experiences, in part because the main character, Donny, played by Richard Gadd, is not a "perfect victim", but rather "a real life, imperfect human".

TALKING ABOUT VIOLENT EXPERIENCES

Counselling services or shelters specifically for men are rare worldwide, and many men are reluctant to seek help. The psychologist Björn Sufke, who helped establish the "Gewalt an Männern" ("Violence against men") helpline in Germany, observes that because of traditional gender

roles, men frequently have an even harder time than women talking about their experiences of violence. They also attend therapy far less often.

“Defining oneself as a victim and seeking help can feel like a blow to one’s masculinity,” says Sufke. “The biggest hurdle is admitting that.” But silence and loneliness can be life-threatening: The global suicide rate is significantly higher for men than for women. Low-threshold approaches like “walk and talk”, which replace traditional therapies with activities that do not require sustained eye contact, like taking a walk, are designed to alleviate men’s fears.

“Counselling services or shelters specifically for men are rare worldwide, and many men are reluctant to seek help.”

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Some initiatives are also attempting to reach boys and men on social media or gaming platforms. For example, British activist Jeremy Indika raises awareness about child abuse on various social-media platforms as well as on podcasts. He wants to draw attention to the fact that many boys and girls experience sexualised violence without it necessarily being obvious. After all, it took a long time for anyone to notice that he himself had been abused by an older man when he was eight years old. “I was doing well in school. I had a strong circle of friends. I was outspoken in class and considered bold and forthcoming,” Indika writes on his website. “There was no way of telling what I had been experiencing. It was like I had buried it deep somewhere.”

At 25, Indika began to experience flashbacks; memories of the assaults were coming back. When he went online to look for other survivors, he realised that this was an enormous problem worldwide. Indika’s digital initiative, “Something to say”, offers a platform to people who were abused as children or adolescents. They show their faces as a way to break the silence surrounding child abuse.

The psychologist Elias Jessen is a PhD candidate who researches communication services for young men at Berlin’s Charité hospital. He advocates for devoting much more attention to digital campaigns in the online spaces where young men spend time. For example, Jessen thinks

that serious topics could be addressed in a relaxed atmosphere on a gaming platform like Twitch. There and on platforms like TikTok and YouTube, as well as on his podcast, he discusses gaming and pop culture alongside issues like mental health, relationships and violence. His goal is to reach young men by addressing them in an approachable and authentic way without being too intellectual or serious.

Jessen reports that feedback has been positive. Some men have written that they now think differently about mental health. Some are even considering starting therapy.

LINKS

If you are a survivor of violence or sexual abuse, please make use of helplines in your country or region. You can find helplines in various world regions here: findahelpline.com

Jeremy Indika’s “Something to say” initiative: jeremyindika.com/stories

Elias Jessen on Twitch: twitch.tv/eliasundmicka



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Photo: picture alliance/Newscom/Will Oliver

The chainsaw that Argentinian President Javier Milei gave tech billionaire Elon Musk as a gift at the Conservative Political Action Conference in February.

AUTHORITARIANISM

The chainsaw men

After decades of progress on the path to gender justice, they're back in power: men for whom masculinity and authoritarian leadership go hand in hand. This authoritarian masculinity cannot bear strong women or non-binary gender identities – nor democratic societies.

BY BIRGIT SAUER

Strong men in politics appear to be back in fashion. They present themselves as conquering heroes on television and in magazines and newspapers – and, above all, on social media. After years of progress towards gender equality in society and politics, and despite a not insignificant number of women holding leadership positions in politics, statehood is all too visibly back in “male hands”.

This overtly male version of statesmanship often bears a somewhat tragic or ridiculous hallmark – like US President Donald Trump's buffoonish grimaces, for instance. Or it

comes across all muscular and manly, à la Russian President Vladimir Putin posing bare-chested on a horse. It places demands on ideal bodies, on male standards of physical strength. Pete Hegseth, who recently appointed himself Minister of War, said in a speech to American generals in September: “An entire generation of generals and admirals were told that they must parrot the insane fallacy that ‘our diversity is our strength’. (...) They were told females and males are the same thing, or that males who think they're females is (sic) totally normal.” Or indeed it can simply be brutal and destructive, as exemplified by Argentinian President Javier Milei's brandishing of a chainsaw.

“Democratic statehood is being sawn apart — ready to be replaced by masculinist leadership.”

What these “strongmen” in the uppermost echelons of power have in common is a penchant for exaggerated masculinity and authoritarianism, for right-wing notions of natural inequality and hierarchy and for exerting power over other people – and of course over other states. The way they see it, relationships involve discipline, subjugation and (the threat of) violence. Political strongmen make masculine authoritarian gestures to demonstrate their physical and national strength, as well as the strength of the state. The risk is that war then ends up being used as political leverage: not only Putin and Trump, but also Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu like to flex their military muscle in a bid to consolidate and expand their positions of authoritarian power at home.

In Germany, it is mainly representatives of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which came second in the country’s 2025 general elections, who share such views. Björn Höcke and Maximilian Krah are prominent members of the party and provide numerous examples. In his book, Höcke accuses German men of having become “wimps”. Ten years ago, he was already urging them to rediscover their “masculinity” by becoming “ready to defend themselves”. Much like Hegseth, he advocates the military as a training ground for masculinity. Krah claimed on TikTok that “softies” won’t find a girlfriend and that what he wants to see is “real men” who are “patriots” and “right-wing”.

WEAK WOMEN AS THE COUNTERPOINT

This authoritarian masculinity – experts call it “protective masculinity” – requires a counterpoint: a weak woman worthy of protection who, in traditional patriarchal and heterosexual relationships, serves the man and of course can be sexually subjugated by him. Those of a right-wing authoritarian leaning thus seek to mobilise opposition to the neoliberal notion of women taking up employment, propagating instead traditional roles such as mother and housewife. It’s not only men who do this: female influencers who dub themselves “tradwives” (short for “traditional wife”) make their money from this latter model.

For some men, subjugating women doesn’t go far enough. Tech billionaires such as Elon Musk and Peter Thiel harbour fantasies of all-powerful masculinity. Some experts and activists see a risk that this could lead to new population control or even eugenic projects (Rumberger and Darnovsky, 2023) – which could possibly end up rendering women entirely superfluous.

Authoritarian masculinity also cannot bear gender ambiguity. It styles itself as the antithesis of the blurring of the clear boundaries between two distinct genders. It seems almost needless to stress that trans* people’s right to exist is challenged in all countries ruled by this type of man. In some, they are all but hunted down and have no chance of a life in safety.

PORTRAYING MEN AS THE VICTIMS

Such right-wing authoritarian ideas of what it means to be a man don’t come out of nowhere; they are the result of an active policy of “masculinist identity”. Right-wing discourse not only calls for traditional gender constellations to be restored but also portrays men as victims of the endeavours to achieve equality, as victims who need to be rescued. Because men in this narrative are in a desperate plight and at risk of losing their social status, they have a legitimate right to defend themselves – with aggression and violence, if need be. In their political communication, the far right thus pledge that a charismatic and masculinised leader will elevate the status of the “man in the street” and give him a new sense of self-assurance.

This requires subordination, however. Authoritarian right-wing actors exploit the contradictory situations created by neoliberalism, such as the precarious nature of male employment and the simultaneous encouragement of women to enter the workforce. These social shifts cause some men to feel persistently anxious, overburdened and disenfranchised. The response of the authoritarian right is to offer these men reassurance in the form of leadership, discipline, hierarchy, but also subordination, control and marginalisation.

REVERSING DEMOCRATISATION THROUGH MASCULINISM

How do these images of masculinity reflect global trends towards authoritarianism and de-democratisation? Though national contexts obviously differ, some common patterns can be identified, nonetheless. Stressing a muscular and “soldier-like” male image is one weapon in the fight for new forms of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) – and thus for new gender relationships. This masculinity is relational and needs to set itself apart from and assert its dominance over femininity. It claims that efforts in recent decades to bring about equality should be reversed in order to establish authoritarian stability, for example in hierarchical gender relations.

At the same time, the fight for new images of maleness is a central aspect of conflicts over cultural hegemony, political authority and power at a time when the neoliberal era is fraught with crises, the global economy is faltering, and the world order is being redefined. The economic conflict between the US and China is one prime example. Masculinist identity politics is being combined with nationalist identity politics. Neoliberal globalisation is at an end, and national identity is being emphasised: “Make America Great Again”. This promises an exclusive sense of belonging rooted in nationality or gender. It advocates a masculinist community in which (strong) men are in charge and that no longer requires any state structures or rules.

Political masculinity in its overly masculinised form isn’t just about individual – and often narcissistic – representation, it is part of a targeted strategy in the current quest for new models of society and political regulation against the backdrop of the deep crisis in neoliberalism. Such debates aim to find authoritarian “solutions” to the neoliberal transformation crises – solutions that bring discipline and are hierarchical and leader-centred – and establish them in people’s everyday lives.

Liberal democratic processes pose an obstacle to such attempts to restructure society and the state. The order that has been in place since the Second World War is being dissolved and democratic statehood sawn apart – ready to be replaced by masculinist leadership. This could lead to a global anarchy of individual states at the international level where the rule of might supersedes transnational and international cooperation. The weakening of the UN is being driven not least by the US government. But it is not only the US that is preparing itself for the war that seems increasingly probable in such a world.

Are there alternatives to these masculine authoritarian dystopias? Discussions of a new global order and of new na-

tional ways of regulating economies that involve more or less state intervention are far from over, so there is still time to take action. This will require a renewed effort to wage a feminist cultural war against the far right, against masculinism and authoritarianism. Feminist movements are still thriving all over the world, not least in Latin America and Europe. They still have the potential to counter such destructive masculinism.

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