MISSING LINK TRUST

BEYOND VIOLENCE: MASCULINITY IN TRANSITION

Understanding the norms shaping young men in rural India



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Executive Summary

Introduction

This study examined perceptions of masculinity among **young men aged 16–25 years in Kultali block, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal.** Drawing on contemporary masculinity literature, the study explored multiple domains including gender roles within the household, violence and control, sexual relationships and consent, emotional expression, peer norms, financial stress, childhood exposure to adversity, and digital engagement. The objective was to understand how young men in a rural setting negotiate traditional and emerging masculine norms.

Methodology

A cross-sectional quantitative design was used. A structured tool was developed based on the conceptual framework and included sections on demographic profile, digital access and usage, and seven domains of masculinity. Snowball sampling was employed. The projected population of young adults aged 16–25 years in Kultali block in 2025 was approximately 30,000. Using the single population proportion formula (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error, p=0.5), the required sample size was calculated as 640 after adjusting for finite population correction, design effect, and non-response. A total of 605 respondents were surveyed.



Key Findings



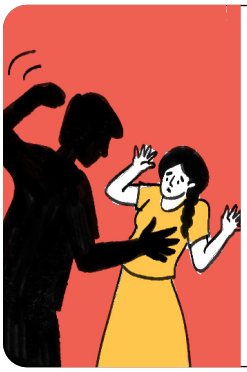
Digital Access and Exposure

93.7% owned a smartphone; **79.2%** accessed the internet daily.
25.1% spent more than 4 hours daily on their phone.
65.0% primarily used social media; **53.1%** watched YouTube videos**.**
25.8% reported exposure to abusive or violent content online.
68.0% sometimes discussed or shared videos with friends.



Gender Roles and Household Norms

85.0% agreed that boys should help with household chores.
72.2% supported equal sharing of household work.
However, **76.9%** agreed men should be main decision-makers, and **82.8%** believed a man should earn so his wife need not work.



Violence, Control and Dominance

72.4% rejected physical violence against wives.
Yet **69.4%** agreed women exaggerate abuse claims, and
67.4% agreed men lose respect when challenged publicly.
63.5% felt it is acceptable for a man to shout at his partner when angry.



Sexual Relationships and Consent

75.2% rejected the idea that "No means Yes."
66.8% disagreed that sharing violent content strengthens male friendships.
However, **47.8%** agreed men should be sexually experienced to prove masculinity.



Emotions and Masculinity

74.2% agreed boys should not show fear or sadness.



Peer Norms

49.4% believed gentle boys lose respect among peers
(**85%** among those who had no formal education endorsed this norm).
49.1% agreed having many girlfriends enhances status
(**78.6%** among those who had no formal education endorsed this norm).



Financial Stress

77.0% worried about insufficient income for basic needs.
66.6% reported that money problems cause fights at home.
46.4% had borrowed money in the past six months due to stress.



Childhood Exposure

24.6% had witnessed domestic violence.
26.4% lived in households with substance misuse.
63.1% reported prolonged financial hardship during childhood.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that masculinity among young men in this rural context reflects a transitional pattern. While overt support for physical violence is relatively low and some gender-equitable attitudes are endorsed, strong adherence to male authority, emotional restriction, sexual status norms, and economic pressure persists. These results highlight the need for multi-dimensional interventions that address emotional socialization, peer cultures, economic stress, and subtle forms of gender dominance in addition to violence prevention.

01 Introduction

1.1 Context

Masculinity is not a biological trait but a socially constructed and culturally reinforced set of norms, behaviours, and expectations assigned to men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Across societies, these norms are shaped by patriarchal structures that privilege male authority, dominance, emotional restraint, and economic provision. Contemporary research suggests that masculinity today often exists in a state of tension where young men may verbally endorse progressive values while simultaneously upholding hierarchical gender norms in practice (Milne & Baker, 2025; Thiel, 2024).

This study situates itself within this evolving but contradictory landscape of masculinity. Drawing on existing literature, it examines masculinity not only as attitudes toward women, but as a broader system of beliefs related to household roles, violence, emotional expression, sexuality, peer validation, economic pressure, and early socialisation experiences.

A. Gender Roles in the Household

Research shows that even where men express support for shared domestic labour, they may continue to view themselves as primary decision-makers and breadwinners (Valsecchi et al., 2023). This reflects what scholars describe as "hybrid masculinity"- a model in which men adopt selective egalitarian practices without relinquishing structural power. Patriarchal masculinity normalises male authority within both public and private spheres, reinforcing expectations that men lead and women comply (Thiel, 2024). Understanding attitudes toward household roles therefore provides insight into whether masculinity is being restructured or merely cosmetically modernised.



B. Violence, Control and Perceived Acceptability

Masculinity research consistently links traditional masculine norms with increased tolerance of aggression, dominance, and intimate partner control (Kimmel, 2008; Perrin et al., 2019). While overt physical violence may be widely condemned, more subtle forms such as emotional intimidation, verbal aggression, or the justification of "disciplining" women often remain socially acceptable. Studies of online masculinities demonstrate how dominance and control are normalised through humour, memes, and influencer culture, allowing young men to distance themselves from explicit misogyny while still reproducing hierarchical gender beliefs (Milne & Baker, 2025). The perceived acceptability of violence and control thus becomes a key marker of how deeply patriarchal norms persist.

C) Sexual Relationships, Consent and Decision-Making

Masculinity is frequently tied to sexual entitlement, conquest, and peer recognition.
Research on gender-hierarchy-legitimising ideologies shows that traditional masculine norms correlate with endorsement of beliefs that men should dominate sexual relationships or that women exaggerate abuse claims (Valsecchi et al., 2023). Digital subcultures such as "manosphere" communities reinforce narratives of male entitlement and victimhood, framing feminism as a threat and positioning heterosexual relationships as arenas of power struggle (Milne & Baker, 2025). Examining attitudes toward consent, persuasion, and decision-making within relationships is therefore central to understanding how masculinity is constructed and enacted.

D) Emotional Expression and Masculine Identity

A recurring theme in masculinity scholarship is the suppression of vulnerability. Patriarchal socialisation discourages boys from expressing fear, sadness, or emotional distress, equating emotional restraint with strength (hooks, 2004; Thiel, 2024). This emotional restriction is not only harmful to relationships but also linked to mental health risks, including higher rates of substance misuse and suicide among men (Courtenay, 2000). Recent research suggests that while alternative models of emotionally expressive masculinity are emerging, they often struggle to compete with dominant norms that equate masculinity with toughness and stoicism (Milne & Baker, 2025).

E) Peer Norms and Homosocial Validation

Masculinity is frequently performed in relation to other men. Peer approval plays a powerful role in shaping behaviours around aggression, sexual status, and dominance (Kimmel, 2008). Research indicates that even when individuals personally reject extreme views, they may conform to peer norms to maintain respect and belonging (Milne & Baker, 2025). Beliefs about whether boys who are gentle lose respect, or whether violent behaviour enhances peer status, reflect the strength of homosocial pressure in reinforcing masculine scripts



F) Financial Stress and the Breadwinner Ideal

Economic insecurity has emerged as a critical factor shaping contemporary masculinity. The persistence of the male breadwinner norm, combined with unstable labour markets and rising financial pressures, creates anxiety and perceived status threat among young men (Lee, 2025). Rather than weakening patriarchal norms, economic precarity can intensify attachment to traditional masculine identities centred on provision and authority. Modern sexism and backlash attitudes are often linked to this perceived loss of status, where economic frustration is redirected toward women or gender equality initiatives (Lee, 2025; Valsecchi et al., 2023). Thus, financial stress is not merely an economic variable but an important driver of masculine identity formation.

G) Exposure to Childhood Trauma and Intergenerational Transmission

Masculinity norms are learned early. Exposure to domestic violence, substance misuse, or chronic household conflict increases the likelihood of normalising aggression and hierarchical gender relations in adulthood (Perrin et al., 2019). Patriarchal masculinity often reproduces itself intergenerationally, as boys internalise models of authority, emotional suppression, and control observed within their households (Thiel, 2024). Examining childhood exposure therefore helps contextualise adult attitudes toward violence, authority, and relationships.

1.2 Rationale for the study

In conclusion, existing literature suggests that masculinity today is characterised by contradiction and negotiation. Young men may adopt progressive language around equality while still endorsing structural male dominance, emotional restraint, sexual entitlement, and control. Digital media, peer norms, economic insecurity, and early socialisation experiences all interact to shape these patterns.
This study builds on this body of research by examining masculinity not as a singular trait, but as a multidimensional construct spanning:

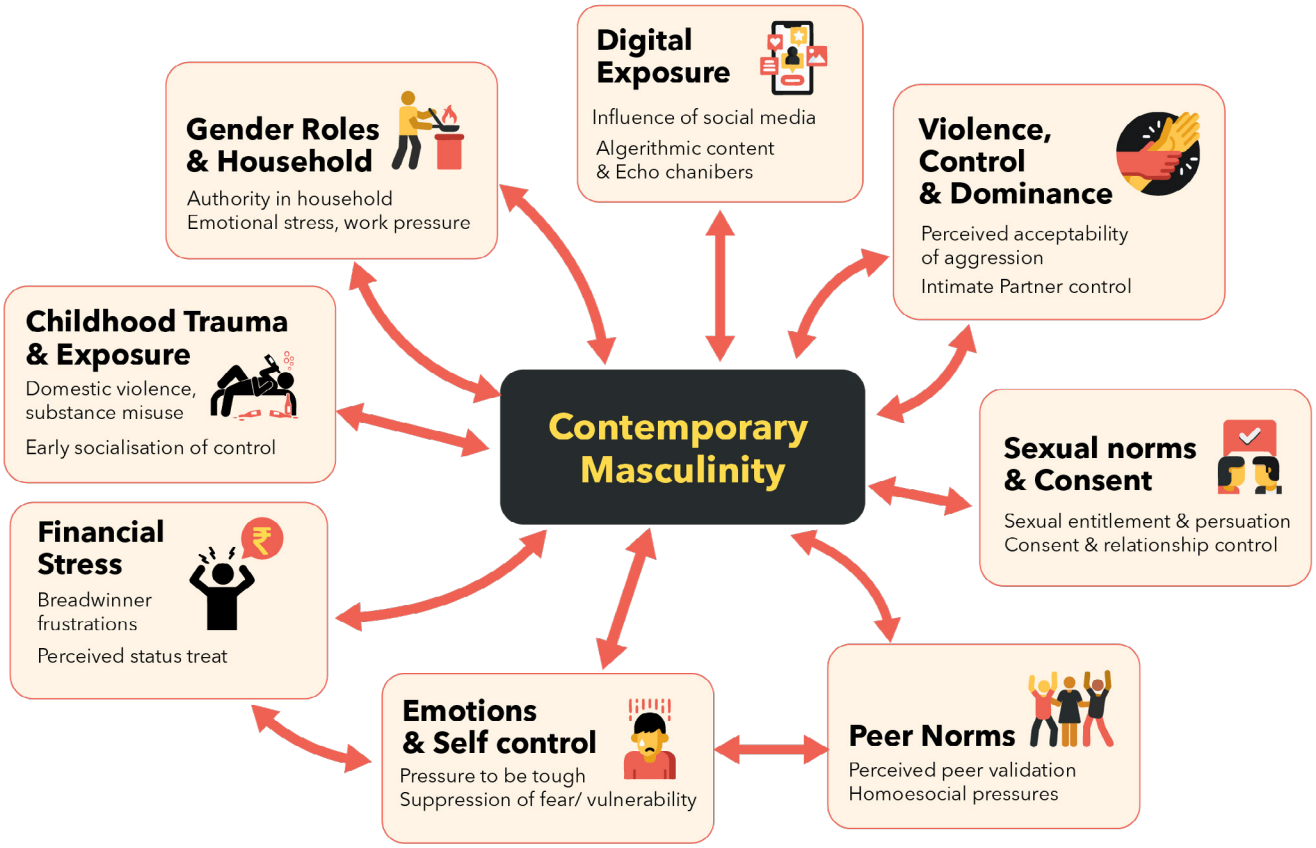
- **Household gender roles**
- **Violence and control**
- **Sexual norms and consent**
- **Emotional expression**
- **Peer validation**
- **Financial stress**
- **Childhood exposure to trauma**

By situating these domains within the broader literature on patriarchal and toxic masculinity, the study aims to capture both overt and subtle expressions of gender hierarchy in contemporary young men's attitudes and experiences.

This study was conceptualised because existing research on masculinity in India has largely focused on isolated domains such as intimate partner violence or gender equality attitudes, without capturing the broader and interconnected drivers of contemporary masculine identity particularly in rural settings. Much of the literature does not adequately integrate everyday gender roles within households, norms around control and consent in relationships, emotional restriction, peer validation, financial stress linked to breadwinner expectations, exposure to childhood trauma, and the growing influence of digital media. In rural contexts like West Bengal, where economic precarity, traditional family structures, and expanding smartphone access coexist, masculinity is likely negotiated through multiple overlapping pressures. There remains a gap in evidence that examines these domains together within a single analytical framework. This study addresses that gap by providing a multidimensional understanding of how masculinity is constructed, experienced, and normalised among young men in a rural setting.

02 Methodology

2.1 Conceptual Framework

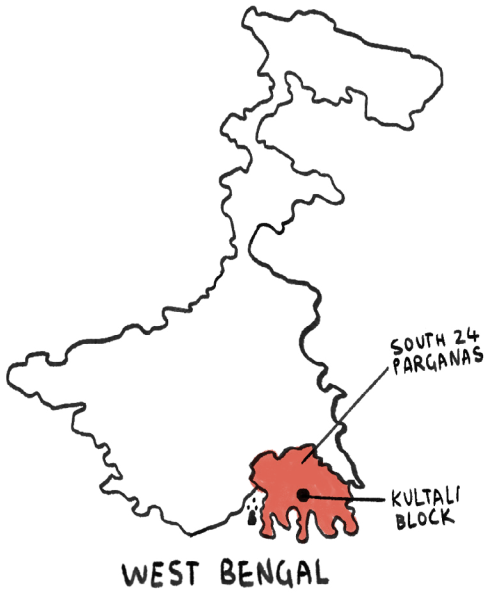


The conceptual framework illustrates masculinity as a multidimensional construct shaped by intersecting structural, social, and relational influences. At the centre lies contemporary masculinity, which is not treated as a fixed trait but as an outcome of dynamic interactions between early life experiences (childhood exposure to violence and hardship), ongoing economic pressures (financial stress and breadwinner expectations), digital and peer environments, and core gendered belief systems. The framework organises masculinity into interconnected domains: gender roles within the household, violence and control, sexual norms and consent, emotional regulation, and peer status, demonstrating how authority, dominance, emotional restriction, and status validation operate together rather than independently.

This framework directly informed the design of the survey tool by structuring it into thematic domains that reflect both attitudinal and experiential dimensions of masculinity. This ensured that the tool captured subtle and everyday forms of masculine identity construction alongside explicit beliefs.
For analysis, the framework guided domain-wise aggregation of responses, enabling examination of patterns within and across domains, as well as the identification of hybrid or contradictory attitudes.

2.2 Research Design

The study adopted a **cross-sectional quantitative research design** to examine attitudes and experiences related to masculinity among young adults. Data was collected at a single point in time, allowing for the assessment of prevailing beliefs, norms, and contextual influences.
A structured questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, guided by the conceptual framework on contemporary masculinity.



The survey instrument consisted of three main components:
1. **Demographic profile**
(age, education, employment status, etc.),
2. **Digital and internet usage patterns**, given the increasing relevance of online exposure in shaping gender norms, and
3. **Seven thematic domains of masculinity**, derived from the conceptual framework.

The study was conducted in Kultali Block of West Bengal, India, a predominantly rural setting. The target population comprised young adults aged 16 to 25 years, a critical life stage where gender norms, identity formation, and peer influence are particularly salient. By focusing on this age group, the study aimed to capture contemporary patterns of masculine identity formation within a rural socio-economic and digital context.

The exclusive use of quantitative methods enabled systematic measurement of attitudes across domains and facilitated domain-wise aggregation and comparative analysis. This design ensured consistency in data collection while aligning closely with the multidimensional conceptual framework underpinning the study.

2.3 Sampling Design

The study employed a **snowball sampling method** to recruit respondents within Kultali Block, West Bengal. Given the rural setting and the absence of a readily available sampling frame of young adults aged 16–25 years, initial participants were identified through community networks and subsequently referred other eligible respondents within their social circles. While this approach does not yield a probability-based representative sample, it enabled access to dispersed youth populations and facilitated participation among young adults within the community.

or sample size estimation, the population of interest was first projected using Census of India data for Kultali CD Block (South 24 Parganas). The population increased from 187,942 in 2001 to 229,053 in 2011, reflecting an average annual exponential growth rate of approximately 2.0%. Assuming a similar growth rate from 2011 to 2025, the projected total population for 2025 was estimated, and based on national demographic patterns indicating that approximately 20% of the population falls within the 16–25 age group (UNFPA, 2023), the estimated number of young people in this age range was approximately 60,000–61,000. Using census sex ratios and linear extrapolation, the projected number of boys aged 15–25 years in Kultali in 2025 was estimated at approximately 30,000.

The sample size was calculated using the single population proportion formula described by Lwanga and Lemeshow. Assuming a prevalence of 50% ($p = 0.5$) to maximise variability, a 95% confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), and 5% absolute precision ($d = 0.05$), the base sample size was 384 respondents. Applying finite population correction for an estimated population of approximately 30,600 eligible boys resulted in a revised sample size of 379. To account for clustering and design-related variability, a design effect of 1.5 was applied, increasing the required sample to 569. After adjusting for an anticipated 10% non-response rate, the final required sample size was 632, which was rounded up to 640 respondents to ensure adequate statistical power.

2.4 Profile of the Respondents

The table below describes the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Particulars	Categories	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Age (in completed years)	16-18	150	24.8%
	19-21	184	30.4%
	22-25	271	44.8%
	Total	605	100.0%
Education Level	College	120	19.8%
	Higher Secondary (11-12)	201	33.2%
	No schooling	14	2.3%
	Primary (1-5)	36	6.0%
	Secondary (9-10)	148	24.5%
	Upper Primary (6-8)	86	14.2%
	Total	605	100.0%
Employment	Employed	316	52.2%
	Student	209	34.5%
	Unemployed	80	13.2%
	Total	605	100.0%

A total of 605 young adults aged 16–25 years participated in the study. Nearly half of the respondents (44.8%) were in the 22–25 years age group, followed by 30.4% aged 19–21 years, and 24.8% aged 16–18 years.

In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents had at least secondary or higher secondary education. About one-third (33.2%) had completed higher secondary (Classes 11–12), and 24.5% had completed secondary education (Classes 9–10). Nearly one-fifth (19.8%) were pursuing or had completed college education, suggesting moderate exposure to formal education within the sample. Only a small proportion reported no schooling (2.3%) or primary-level education.

Regarding current job status, just over half of the respondents (52.2%) were employed, while 34.5% were students, and 13.2% were unemployed. The presence of both working youth and students reflects a heterogeneous sample encompassing individuals navigating education, labour market entry, and early adulthood responsibilities. This diversity in life-stage positioning provides an important contextual backdrop for understanding how masculinity is shaped by educational exposure, employment status, and economic expectations within a rural setting.

03 Key Findings

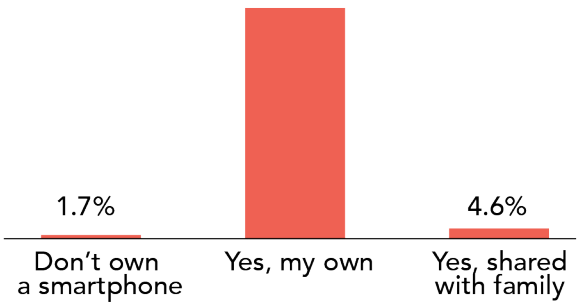
This chapter presents the key findings of the study, organised according to the domains outlined in the conceptual framework. The analysis examines patterns of attitudes and experiences related to gender roles, violence and control, sexual norms, emotions, peer influences, financial stress, and childhood exposure, highlighting both prevailing trends and internal contradictions within contemporary masculinity in the study setting.

3.1 Pattern of Usage of Smart Phone Among Respondents

A. Ownership of Smartphones

Fig. 1 shows that smartphone ownership was nearly universal among respondents, with **93.7% reporting ownership of their own device,** while only 4.6% shared a phone with family members and 1.7% did not own a smartphone. This indicates widespread individual-level digital access within the study population.

Fig 1. Ownership of Smartphnes Among Respondents (n=605)

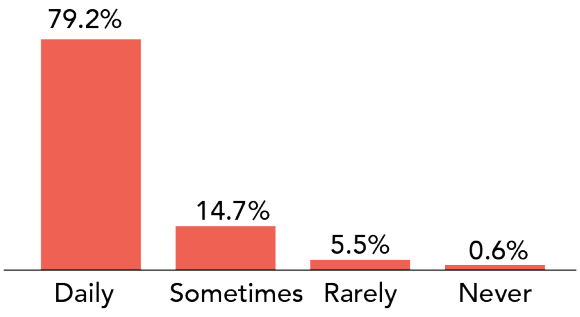


Ownership was highest among respondents aged **22–25 years (98.9%)**, those who had **completed college (99.2%),** and those who were **employed (99.1%),** suggesting that older age, higher educational attainment, and labour force participation were associated with greater independent smartphone access. These patterns reflect increasing digital integration as young adults transition into higher education and employment.

B. Internet Access on Phone

A total of 597 respondents who had access to smartphones were enquired about the internet accessibility on their phones. Figure 2 indicates that internet access through mobile phones was highly prevalent among respondents, with **79.2% reporting daily access,** while 14.7% accessed the internet sometimes, 5.5% rarely, and only 0.6% never accessed it. This reflects consistent and routine digital engagement within the study population.

Fig 2. Internet Access on Phone (n=597)

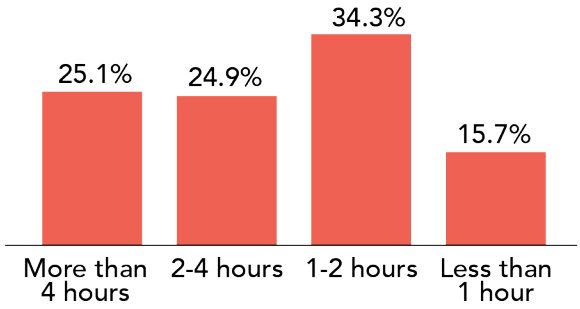


Daily internet access was highest among respondents aged **22–25 years (84.3%)**, those with **no schooling (84.6%),** and the **unemployed (85.7%)**. The pattern suggests that frequent internet use was not limited to more educated or employed groups; rather, digital connectivity appears to be deeply embedded across socio-educational categories, including those with limited formal education and those outside the labour force.

C. Time spent on phone daily

Fig. 3 shows that a substantial proportion of respondents spent considerable time on their phones daily. While 34.3% reported spending **1–2 hours per day,** nearly half of the respondents (25.1% spending more than 4 hours and 24.9% spending 2–4 hours) reported **more than two hours of daily phone use,** indicating high levels of screen engagement. Only 15.7% spent less than one hour per day on their phones.

Fig 3. Time Spent on Phone Daily (n=597)

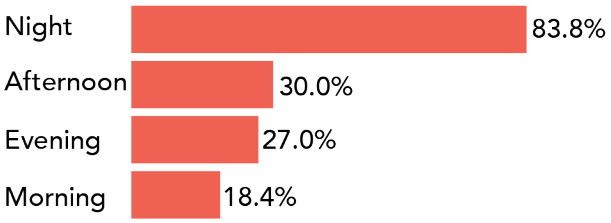


These findings suggest that prolonged digital exposure is common within the study population, reinforcing the relevance of online environments as influential spaces in shaping attitudes, peer norms, and masculine identity formation.

D. Time of the Day When Phone is Used the Most

Fig. 4 indicates that phone usage was predominantly concentrated during the **night (83.8%)**, with substantially lower usage reported in the afternoon (30.0%), evening (27.0%), and morning (18.4%). This pattern suggests that late-night hours constitute the primary period of digital engagement among respondents.

Fig 4. Time Spent on Phone Daily (n=597)



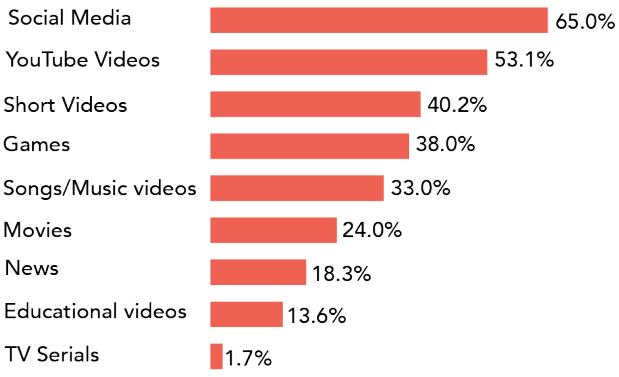
Totals exceed 100% as question was multiple choice

The concentration of phone use at night may have implications for both the type of content consumed and the social context of engagement, as late-night browsing often occurs in more private and unsupervised settings. These further underscores the importance of understanding digital exposure within the broader framework of masculinity formation.

E. Most Frequently Used Mobile Applications/ Platforms Among Respondents

Fig. 5 shows that social media (65.0%) was the most commonly accessed content on mobile phones, followed by YouTube videos (53.1%) and short videos (40.2%). Entertainment-oriented activities such as games (38.0%) and songs/music videos (33.0%) were also widely reported. In contrast, fewer respondents reported regularly watching news (18.3%) or educational videos (13.6%), and very few engaged with TV serials (1.7%).

Fig 5. Most Frequently Used Mobile Applications/ Platforms (n=597)

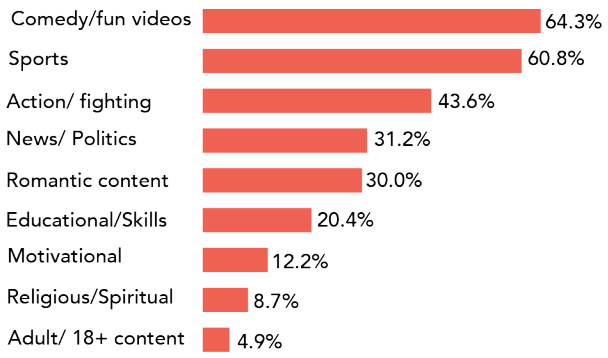


These findings indicate that mobile phone usage among respondents was predominantly driven by **social and entertainment-based content**, much of which is algorithm-driven and peer-shared. This pattern reinforces the relevance of digital platforms as key environments through which norms, peer validation, and potentially gendered narratives are circulated and internalised.

F. Most watched content on phone

Fig. 6 shows that **comedy/fun videos (64.3%**) and **sports-related content (60.8%)** were the most frequently watched categories among respondents. This was followed by action/fighting content (43.6%), while news/politics (31.2%) and romantic content (30.0%) were also moderately consumed. In contrast, fewer respondents reported watching educational/skills-based content (20.4%), motivational content (12.2%), or religious/spiritual content (8.7%), and very few reported viewing adult (18+) content (4.9%).

Fig 6. Most Watched Content on Phone (n=597)



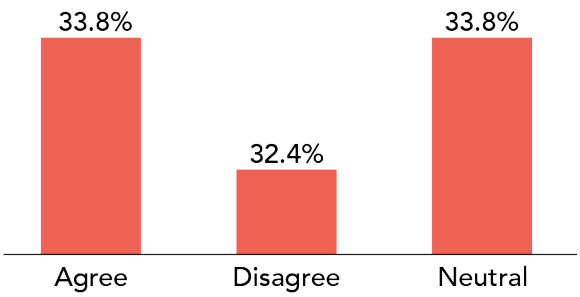
Overall, the dominant pattern reflects a preference for **entertainment-driven and performance-oriented genres,** particularly those associated with humour, sports, and action. Given that multiple responses were allowed, these patterns suggest layered and overlapping media exposure, with particular relevance for understanding how narratives around masculinity, competition, aggression, and peer bonding may be reinforced in everyday digital consumption.

Most respondents preferred **Bengali (56.1%)** for watching videos, followed by **Hindi (42.4%),** while very few preferred **English (1.5%)**. This indicates that digital content consumption in the study setting is predominantly rooted in **regional and vernacular languages**, highlighting the importance of locally contextualised media environments in shaping attitudes and norms.

G. Perceived influence of videos one watch

Fig.7 shows that perceptions regarding the influence of videos were evenly distributed among respondents. While **33.8% agreed** that the videos they watch influence how they think and behave, an equal proportion **(33.8%)** remained neutral, and **32.4% disagreed.**

Fig 7. Perceived Influence of Videos on How one Think & Behave (n=597)

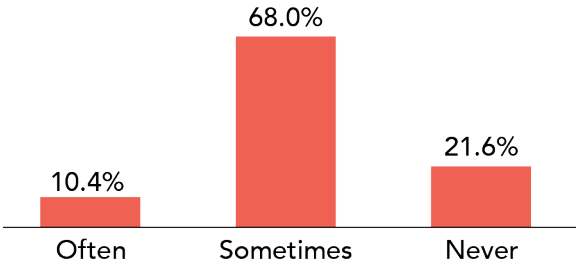


This near-equal distribution suggests that although a substantial proportion explicitly acknowledge media influence, an equally large segment either does not perceive such influence or remains uncertain. The high proportion of neutral responses may indicate limited self-awareness of media effects, highlighting the possibility of implicit influence operating even when not consciously recognised.

H. Discussion around the videos one watch

Fig.8 shows that a large majority of respondents engage in peer-based video interaction. While **68.0% reported sometimes discussing or sharing videos with friends,** 10.4% did so often, and 21.6% reported never engaging in such discussions.

Fig 8. Discuss and Share Videos with Friends (n=597)

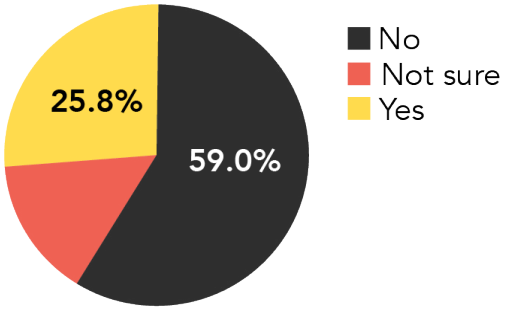


These findings suggest that digital content is not consumed in isolation but is frequently circulated and reinforced within peer networks. The high proportion of respondents who at least occasionally share or discuss videos indicates that peer groups may play an important role in normalising, amplifying, or validating the themes embedded in the content consumed.

I. Exposed to Abusive or Violent Content

Fig. 9 indicates that **25.8% of respondents reported having seen content that promotes violence, abuse, or makes fun of others,** while 59.0% reported not having seen such content and 15.2% were unsure.

Fig 9. Exposed to Abusive/ Violent Content (n=597)



Although a majority denied exposure, the fact that roughly one in four respondents acknowledged encountering such content and an additional segment remained uncertain suggests that exposure to potentially harmful narratives is present within the digital environment. The "not sure" responses may also indicate normalisation of such content, where aggressive or abusive themes are not always consciously recognised as problematic.

3.2 Factors affecting Masculinity

A. Gender Roles in Household (HH)

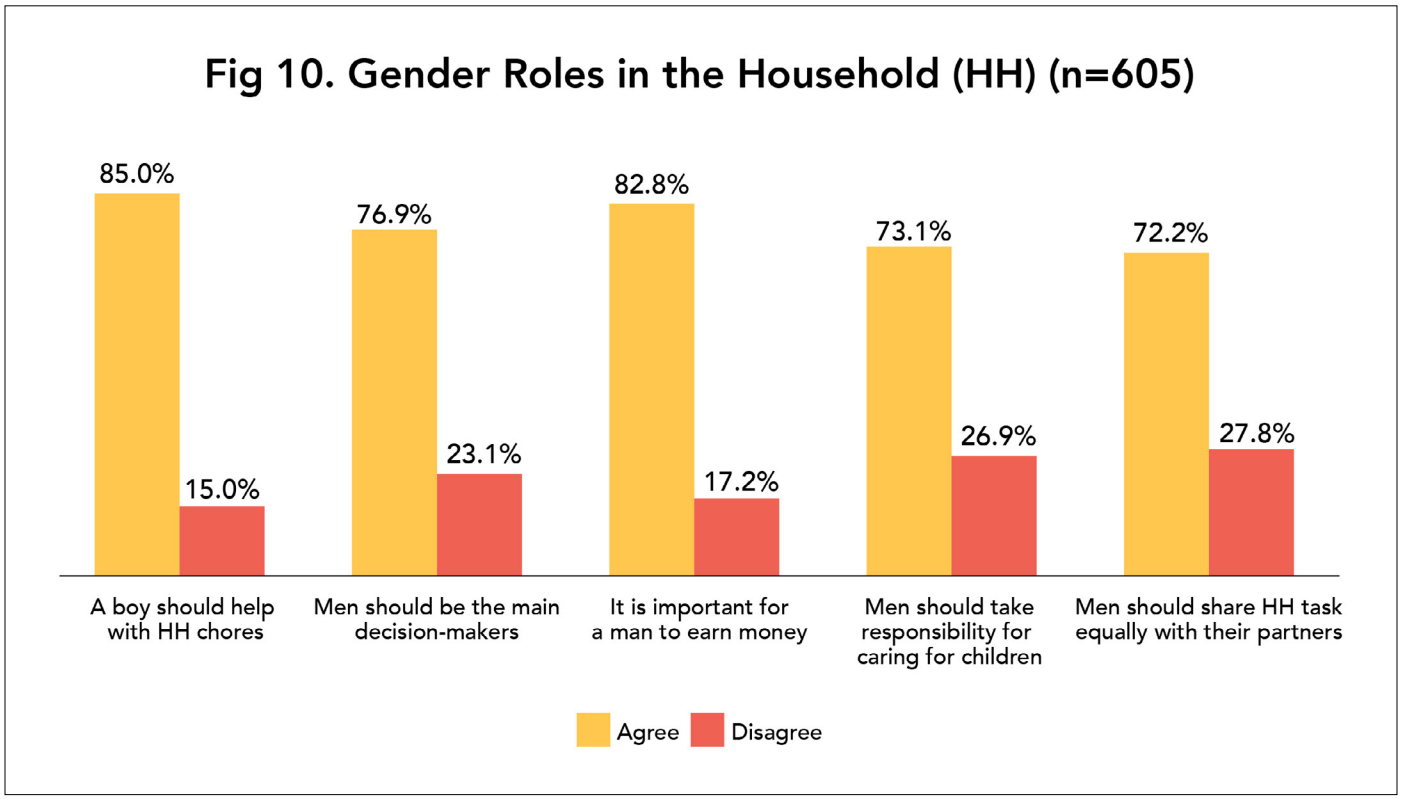
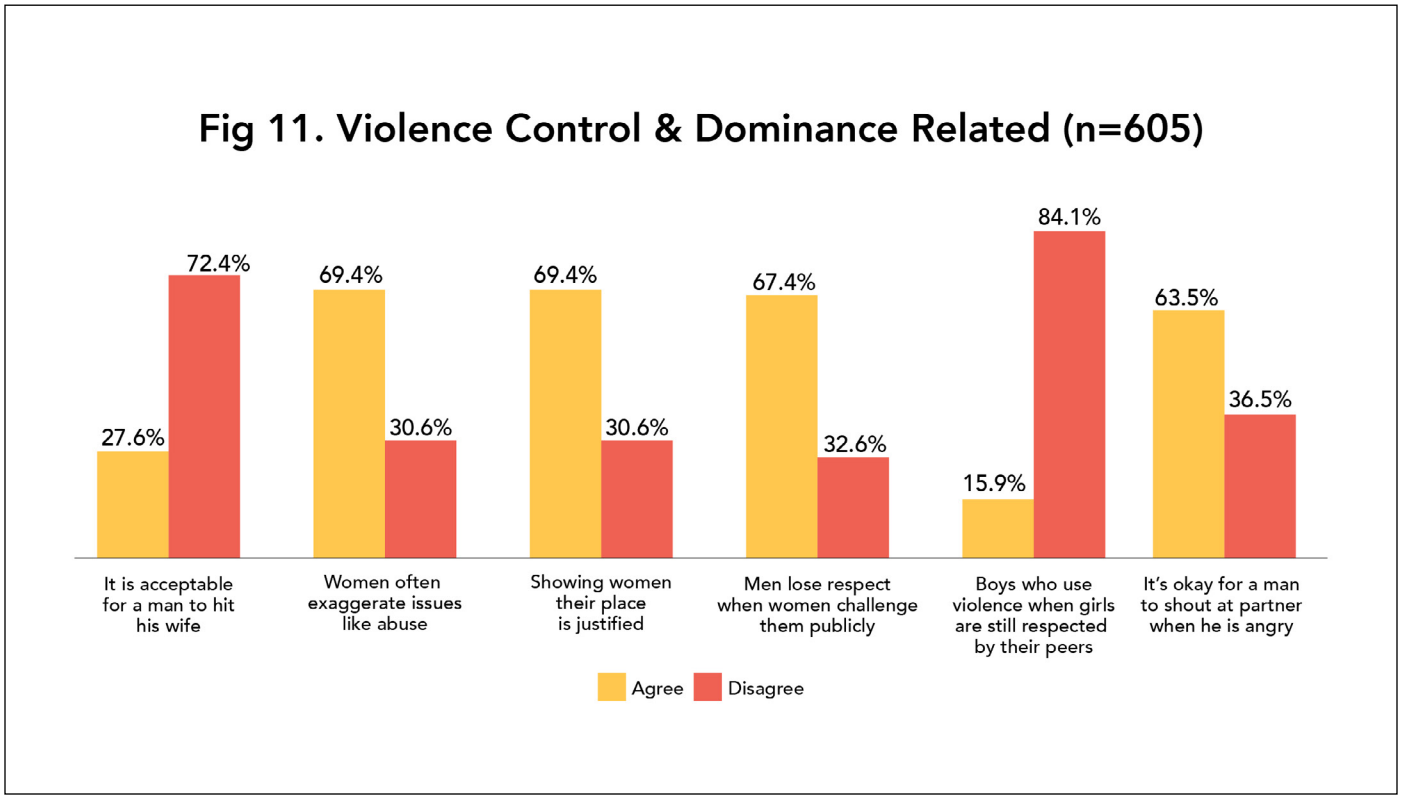


Fig. 10 reveals a pattern of what may be described as **"hybrid masculinity"**—where support for certain egalitarian practices coexists with strong endorsement of traditional male authority. A large majority agreed that boys should help with household chores (85.0%) and that men should take responsibility for caring for children (73.1%) and share household tasks (72.2%). These responses suggest openness to visible forms of participation within the domestic sphere.

However, at the same time, a substantial proportion agreed that men should be the main decision-makers in the family (76.9%) and that it is important for a man to earn money, so his wife does not have to work (82.8%). These findings reflect the persistence of the **male breadwinner norm and patriarchal authority structure,** consistent with scholarship that shows men may adopt the language of equality while retaining structural control within heterosexual households.

Taken together, the findings indicate that respondents are not rejecting gender equality outright but are negotiating it within boundaries that preserve male authority and economic centrality. This aligns with broader research suggesting that contemporary masculinity often integrates selective progressive attitudes without fully dismantling hierarchical gender power relations.

B. Violence, Control and Dominance

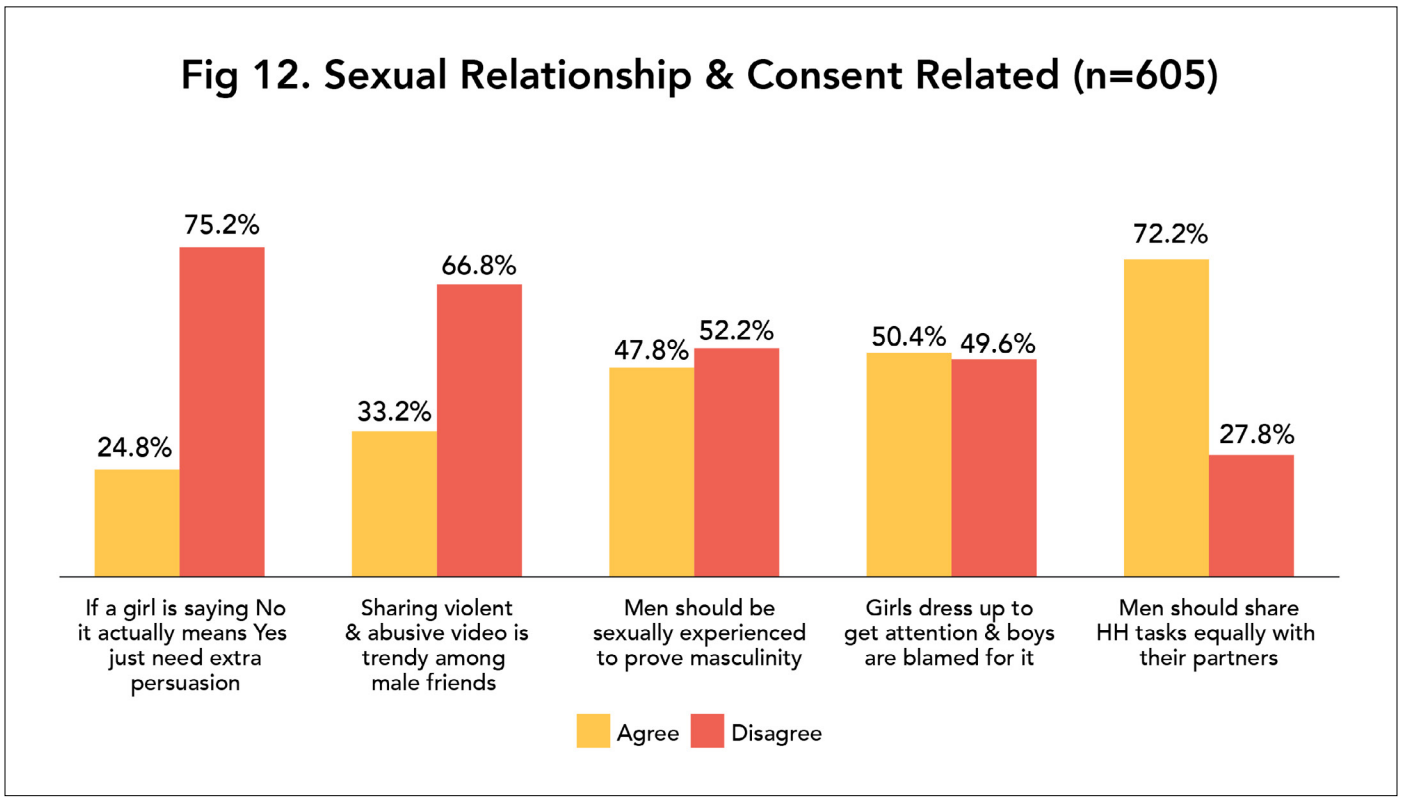


The findings reflect a **complex and internally contradictory pattern** in attitudes toward violence and control. A strong majority rejected overt physical violence: 72.4% disagreed that it is acceptable for a man to hit his wife, and 84.1% disagreed that boys who use violence against girls are respected by peers. This suggests that explicit physical aggression is not widely legitimised at a normative level.

However, subtler forms of control and dominance remain more socially tolerated. Nearly seven in ten respondents agreed that women often exaggerate abuse (69.4%) and that showing women "their place" is sometimes justified (69.4%). Similarly, 67.4% agreed that men lose respect when challenged publicly by women, and 63.5% agreed that it is acceptable for a man to shout at his partner when angry.

This pattern indicates a distinction between **rejecting extreme violence while normalising everyday forms of symbolic, emotional, or status-based control.** Such findings align with research suggesting that contemporary masculinity may disavow overt brutality while continuing to legitimise authority, dominance, and disciplinary control within intimate relationships.

C. Sexual relationship and Consent



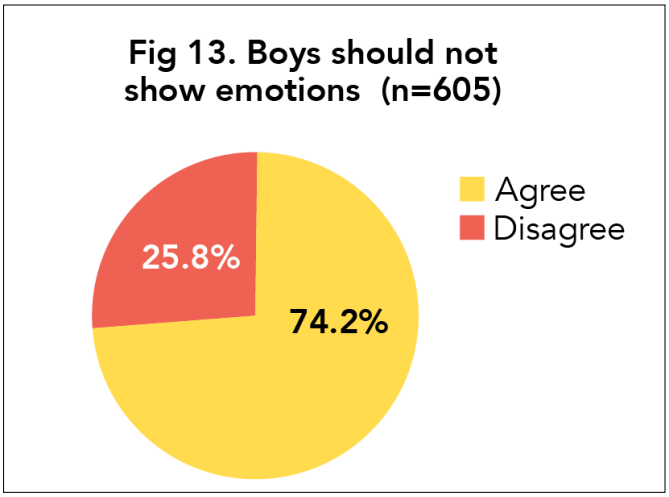
The findings on sexual relationships and consent reveal both encouraging shifts and persistent tensions. A substantial majority rejected coercive interpretations of consent: 75.2% disagreed that when a girl says "No" it actually means "Yes," indicating broad normative support for explicit consent. Similarly, 66.8% disagreed that sharing violent or abusive videos is trendy among male friends, suggesting limited endorsement of overtly harmful peer behaviours.

However, attitudes related to masculinity and sexual status were more divided. Nearly half (47.8%) agreed that men should be sexually experienced to prove their masculinity, while 52.2% disagreed, reflecting ambivalence around sexual entitlement and performance-based masculinity. Likewise, responses were almost evenly split on victim-blaming narratives—50.4% agreed that girls dress up to get attention and boys are blamed for it, while 49.6% disagreed. However, it was also found that significantly higher proportion of youth (71.4%) with no formal education endorsed the victim blaming narrative.

Overall, the pattern suggests a **rejection of explicit coercion but continued negotiation around sexual entitlement, peer validation, and gendered blame.** This reflects a transitional normative space where consent is verbally acknowledged, yet deeper beliefs about male sexual status and female responsibility remain contested.

D. Emotions & Self-Control

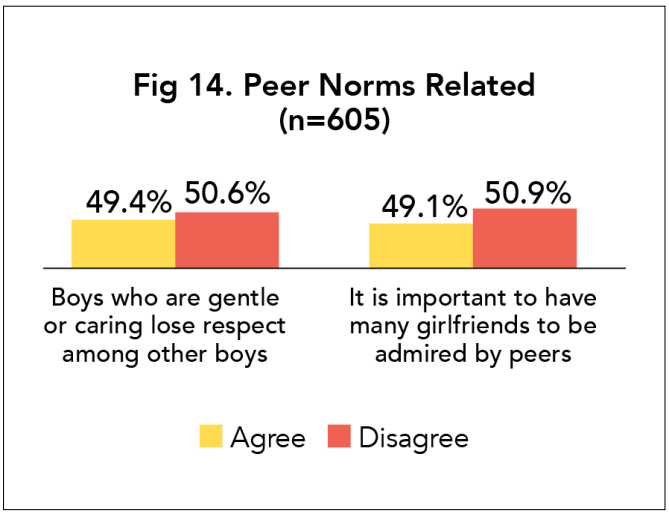
A substantial majority of respondents (74.2%) agreed that boys should not show emotions such as fear, sadness, or stress, while only 25.8% disagreed. This indicates a strong internalisation of restrictive emotional norms, where emotional suppression is seen as central to masculine identity. The finding reflects the persistence of "emotional stoicism" as a valued masculine trait among young men in the study area.



E. Peer Norms

Responses on peer norms appear divided, reflecting ambivalence rather than strong consensus. About half of the respondents (49.4%) agreed that boys who are gentle or caring lose respect among other boys, indicating that traditional peer expectations of toughness remain influential. At the same time, a nearly equal proportion disagreed (50.6%), suggesting the presence of competing or shifting norms around acceptable masculine behaviour.

Similarly, views were almost evenly split on whether having many girlfriends is important for peer admiration (49.1% agree vs. 50.9% disagree). Further subgroup analysis was conducted by age and education level to examine variations in peer-related norms. No significant differences were observed across age groups, indicating that these perceptions were relatively consistent among respondents aged 15–25 years.



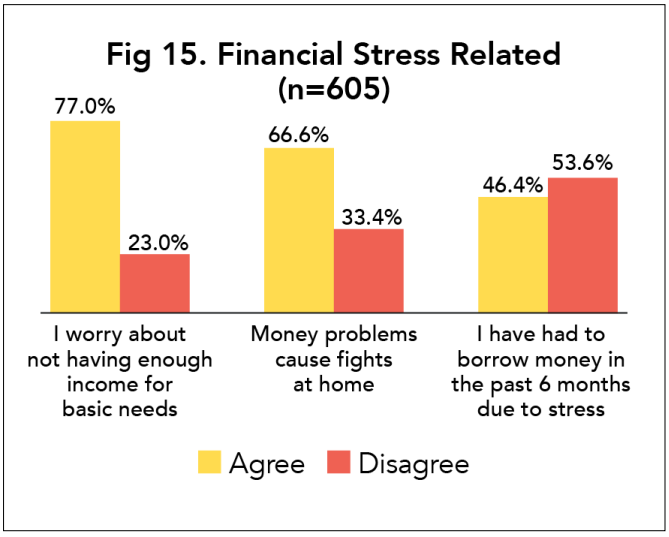
However, differences emerged by education level. A significantly higher proportion of youth with no formal schooling endorsed these norms: **85% agreed that boys who are gentle or caring lose respect among other boys, and 78.6% agreed that having many girlfriends is important for peer admiration.**

This suggests that lower educational attainment may be associated with stronger adherence to traditional peer-status expectations linked to masculinity.

F. Financial Stress

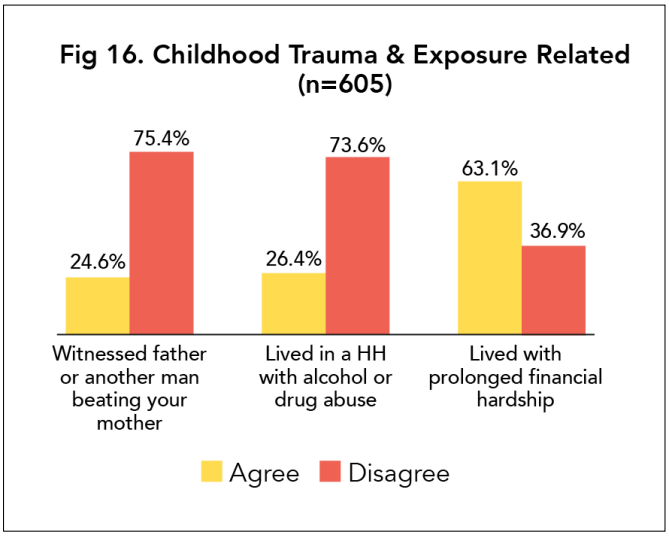
Financial stress emerged as a significant concern among respondents. A large majority (77.0%) reported worrying about not having enough income for basic needs, and 66.6% agreed that money problems cause fights at home, indicating that economic insecurity is both personally and relationally salient.

Nearly half (46.4%) also reported borrowing money in the past six months due to stress, suggesting lived experiences of financial strain. These findings reinforce the strong linkage between breadwinner expectations and masculine identity, where economic vulnerability may intensify pressures related to status, authority, and household dynamics.



G. Childhood Trauma and Exposure

Exposure to childhood adversity was present for a notable proportion of respondents. Nearly one in four (24.6%) reported witnessing their father or another man beating their mother, and 26.4% reported living in a household with alcohol or drug misuse. More prominently, 63.1% reported having lived with prolonged financial hardship, indicating that economic strain formed a significant part of early life experiences. These patterns suggest that for a substantial minority, masculinities may have been shaped within contexts of stress, instability, and exposure to conflict, reinforcing intergenerational norms around control, coping, and authority.



04 Discussion & Conclusion

4.1 Discussion

This study examined multiple dimensions of masculinity among young men aged 15–25 years in a rural block of West Bengal, situating gender norms within household roles, violence and control, sexual relationships, emotional expression, peer status, financial stress, and childhood exposure. The findings reveal a complex and internally contradictory configuration of masculine norms that resonate with contemporary masculinity scholarship.

First, the coexistence of egalitarian and hierarchical gender beliefs is notable. While a large majority endorsed boys' participation in household chores and shared domestic responsibility, substantial proportions simultaneously supported male decision-making authority and the primacy of the male breadwinner role. This dual pattern aligns with research on hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), where men adopt selective elements of gender equality without relinquishing structural dominance. Similar tensions have been documented in Indian and global contexts, where young men articulate progressive attitudes in public discourse while retaining authority within intimate and familial spheres (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2015). The findings therefore suggest not a linear shift toward gender equality, but rather a reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity in more socially acceptable forms.

Second, attitudes toward violence reflect both change and continuity. While most respondents rejected explicit physical violence against women, endorsement of statements related to reputational control (e.g., men losing respect when challenged) and the justification of disciplining women indicate persistence of symbolic dominance. This pattern mirrors findings from multi-country studies showing that overt violence may be publicly disapproved, yet norms of control, entitlement, and authority remain deeply embedded (Barker et al., 2011; Fleming et al., 2015). Such distinctions between physical aggression and normative control suggest that prevention efforts must address underlying gender hierarchies rather than focusing solely on violence as an isolated behaviour.

Third, in the domain of sexual relationships and consent, strong rejection of coercive myths (e.g., "No means Yes") coexisted with endorsement of sexual experience as proof of masculinity and ambivalence around victim-blaming. These findings are consistent with literature demonstrating that heterosexual performance and sexual status remain central to masculine identity, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Flood, 2008; Santana et al., 2006). The persistence of sexual entitlement norms—even in attenuated form—indicates that discourses of consent may be emerging without fully displacing traditional expectations of male sexual assertion.
Emotional restriction emerged as one of the most strongly endorsed norms, with a substantial majority agreeing that boys should not display vulnerability. This finding is consistent with research linking masculinity to stoicism, emotional suppression, and reduced help-seeking (Courtenay, 2000; Addis &

Mahalik, 2003). Emotional control appears to function as a core axis of masculine identity in this context, potentially reinforcing aggression, stress internalization, and relational conflict.
Peer norms were evenly divided, suggesting a contested masculine terrain. Approximately half of respondents perceived gentleness as incompatible with peer respect or associated multiple romantic relationships with status. This aligns with scholarship on homosocial regulation, where peer validation serves as a mechanism for reinforcing gender conformity (Connell, 1995; Pascoe, 2007). The split distribution may indicate generational transition, where dominant and alternative masculinities coexist within the same social networks.

Economic stress was highly prevalent and closely linked to masculine expectations of provision. Concerns about income sufficiency and financial hardship reflect what has been termed "masculinity strain" or "breadwinner stress," where economic precarity intensifies pressures to assert control or authority (Silberschmidt, 2001; Gibbs et al., 2018). In rural settings marked by limited employment opportunities, economic vulnerability may therefore reinforce hierarchical gender norms rather than weaken them.
Finally, a substantial minority reported exposure to domestic violence or substance misuse during childhood, and a majority experienced prolonged financial hardship. Intergenerational transmission of gender norms and violence has been widely documented (Jewkes et al., 2010), suggesting that early socialization contexts shape later endorsement of control-oriented masculine scripts.
Taken together, the findings suggest that masculinity in this rural context is neither uniformly traditional nor fully egalitarian. Instead, it reflects a negotiated and contextually embedded form of masculinity characterized by selective acceptance of gender equality, persistent authority norms, strong emotional restriction, and significant economic pressure. The results contribute to literature by providing multi-domain evidence from a rural Indian setting, where scholarship has often focused on single outcomes (e.g., intimate partner violence) rather than examining masculinity as an interconnected system of beliefs and lived conditions.

4.2 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that contemporary masculinities among young men in rural West Bengal are shaped by intersecting influences of gender hierarchy, peer validation, economic stress, emotional norms, and early exposure to adversity. While overt support for physical violence appears to be declining, subtler forms of dominance, authority, and restrictive emotionality remain widespread.
These findings underscore the need for interventions that move beyond violence prevention alone and address the broader architecture of masculine identity—including economic insecurity, peer cultures, emotional socialization, and intergenerational norms—to foster more equitable and health-promoting masculinities.

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