

## AN INTERVENTION FOR BOYS AIMED AT PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN – QUALITATIVE OUTCOME

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*Programmes designed to empower women in an attempt to eradicate violence against them address only one side of the coin. To promote respectful gender relationships, it is also necessary to change the destructive perceptions of masculinity commonly found among men and boys. The 12-session Hero Empathy Programme was implemented for Grade 5 boys at 10 primary schools in low-resourced communities in South Africa (age range: 10–13 years; black = 100%). The aim was to expose all the Grade 5 boys in those schools to alternative perspectives on masculinity and respectful gender relationships. Before the intervention, focus group discussions were held with the boys to gain an understanding of their conceptualisations and experiences in their communities. Focus group discussions held after the intervention explored changes in the boys' gender perspectives and behaviour. After the intervention, boys questioned gender stereotypes, respected girls more, showed less violence towards girls and accepted a positive perspective of masculinity, which is to be strong and to provide for and protect the family. The intervention showed promise with regard to its ability to promote respectful gender relationships from a young age. To enhance sustainability and have an effect on the social norms of communities, the intervention should be widely implemented.*

**Keywords:** Violence against women, masculinity, respectful gender relationships, primary school boys, qualitative research, South Africa

### 1. Introduction

Violence against women in South Africa, including femicide, rape and intimate partner violence, has been described by the president of the country as “the war against South African women” (Ramaposa, 2020). The rate at which women are killed by intimate partners is estimated to be five times higher than the global average. It is estimated that 138 per 100 000 women were raped during 2016/17, which is among the highest incidences of this crime in the world. It is further estimated that only one in 25 cases is reported to the police (Gouws, 2022; Le Roux, 2022; SAPS Crime Statistics 2022/2023; Statistics South Africa, 2018). In 2019, it was estimated that during the previous 12 months, 18% of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 years had experienced physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their partners (Dubois, 2022). It was further reported that in African countries almost half (45.6%) of all women in the

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abovementioned age group experienced a lifetime prevalence of physical and sexual violence perpetrated by both intimate partners and non-partners (Centre for the study of violence and reconciliation, 2016; Mpani & Nsibande, 2015; WHO, 2013).

Despite South Africa having a strong legislative and policy-enabling environment that seeks to protect and promote the rights of women (Sibanda et al., 2017) and several media campaigns and interventions to empower women are implemented (Righi et al., 2019), women are still at high risk of intimate partner violence (Jewkes et al., 2010; Quarraisha Abdool & Cheryl, 2016). Mannell et al. (2019) explain that behavioural interventions are not successful as they do not address gender norms and deeply entrenched cultural perspectives underlying violence against women.

Violence against women is deeply entrenched in the traditional patriarchal belief system, which supports a biased power structure that maintains male dominance and female subordination (Corradi et al., 2016). In such a system, men are allowed certain privileges that are not accessible to women (Dickerson, 2013; Gibbs et al., 2018; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). In efforts to maintain their position of power and authority, males are at times allowed to engage in violent behaviour towards other males and females (Gibbs et al., 2018; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Jewkes et al., 2015), while women are advised to endure abusive relationships (Gouws, 2022; Matthews & Abrahams, 2015). In order to challenge violence against women in communities, it is therefore necessary to challenge patriarchal beliefs and conceptions of masculinity, and their effect on gender relationships.

### **1.1 Masculinity**

Masculinity can be characterised as the social construct comprising of sets of norms, values and behaviours that a particular culture requires men and boys to adhere to (Omar, 2011; Segal, 2004). The concept hegemonic masculinity was coined by Connell (1995) to conceptualise an honoured or desired form of masculinity that is dominant in a given space and time. Hegemonic masculinity is seen as an interpretation, understanding and expectation of what it means to be a man in the specific context (Hunter et al., 2017). Hegemonic masculinity is characterised by physical “toughness”, the suppression of emotion, the exhibition of aggression and sexual dominance (Connell, 2016; Morrell et al., 2013; Shefer et al., 2007). Because men are supposed to conform to these masculine norms, they are expected to act “manly” or “macho” and not to show weakness. Viewed from this perspective of masculinity, violence against women can be understood as a demonstration of masculinity as being strong, tough, in control and sexually dominant (Jewkes et al., 2015). Since hegemonic masculinity is set as an ideal with which not all men can or want to identify (Mfecane, 2018), the contrasting concept “caring masculinity”, built on an egalitarian model, developed (Hunter et al., 2017; Msiza, 2019). Masculinity can thus be accessed on a spectrum from hegemonic masculinity (being strong, tough, unemotional, dominant and violent) to caring masculinity (sensitive, emotional expressive, interdependent and caring). Men and boys thus have to negotiate and develop their sense of masculinity on this spectrum.

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## **1.2. Prevention of violence against women**

The prevention of violence against women calls for countering perspectives of masculinity and gender norms that implicitly or explicitly allow interpersonal violence perpetrated by men/boys (Hearn et al., 2021). Currently there is widely accepted support for changes in the perceptions of destructive aspects of masculinity and a move towards caring masculinity (American Psychological Association (APA), 2018; Kehler, 2020; Langa, 2020).

Interventions aimed at changing men's conceptualisation of their masculinity, gender relationships and violence against women in an African context are challenging as those conceptions are often viewed as part of a person's identity and are socially and culturally accepted. Over the past decade several interventions were implemented in efforts to change gender norms and curtail intimate partner violence, with little success (Gibbs et al., 2020; Jewkes et al., 2014; Pettifor et al., 2018). For example, a multilevel community mobilisation programme in a peri-urban area was unable to transform gender attitudes and had limited effect with regard to reducing intimate partner violence perpetrated by males (Christofides et al., 2020).

Since young boys' constructions of masculinity and gender relationships develop through the process of socialisation in a social and cultural context, and are modelled through their social networks, especially in their families, they adopt unequal gender norms and stereotypes from a young age (Bhana, 2005; Fry et al., 2019; Fulu et al., 2017; Govender & Bhana, 2022; Jewkes et al., 2020; Kray et al., 2017; Leaper, 2014; Mathews et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2018; Yount et al., 2018). Kostas (2022) points out that school is a critical area where children's gender performance unfolds and relationships develop. Violence, including gender-based violence was found to be common in primary school contexts (Statistics South Africa, 2023; Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023). Research conducted at South African primary schools has shown that boys of eight to nine years invest in the male provider role (Govender & Bhana, 2022) and participate in the early formation of their masculine power based on material wealth, physical strength and toughness (Govender & Bhana, 2023; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020). In a context where violence, gender, poverty and culture were related, it was found that in areas of poverty, boys reclaimed their masculine status through violence (Bhana et al., 2021). Teachers recognise gender power imbalances in interactions between primary school children, but often regard such violence as part of innocent play (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017).

The creation of an awareness among young boys of alternative forms of masculinity with the focus on gender equality and respectful relationships can be an opportunity to address violence against girls and women from an early age (García, 2014; Keller et al., 2017). Currently there is a scarcity of interventions to address violence and inequalities in primary schools in South Africa (Mayeza & Bhana, 2020), as well as internationally (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023). This research aimed to assess the value of the Hero Empathy Programme for boys (Action Breaks Silence, 2021), which was adapted for this context to raise awareness of alternative masculinities and respectful gender norms to shape boys' future relationships.

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### 1.3. The HERO Empathy Programme of boys

The HERO Empathy Programme of boys (Action Breaks Silence, 2021; Mndende, 2021) aimed to create a world free of fear of violence against women by providing young boys an alternative perspective on masculinity and gender relationships based on respect. The situation analysis (in Section 3.1) was used to link the understanding of boys' constructions and experiences to the programme content.

The goals of the programme were:

- To develop boys' self-esteem and healthy expression of emotions
- To break down gender stereotypes and accept gender equality
- To build empathetic attitudes and respectful behaviours towards women and girls
- To prevent abusive relationships by setting boundaries, building healthy relationships and becoming active bystanders by reporting acts of violence they witnessed
- To create a safe and positive environment where boys could express their feelings and have their voices heard within their peer group
- To provide positive role models by using both male and female trainers
- To prevent abusive and violent behaviour against women and girls in the long run (Action Breaks Silence, 2021).

It is argued that early intervention could contribute to social learning and the forming of acceptable gender perceptions that could eventually change patterns of violent behaviour towards women and girls.

The programme consists of twelve sessions presented in two phases, each consisting of six one-hour sessions. The content of each session is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Content of the programme**

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Phase 1	
1	Establish a safe environment. I am worthy of self-love: Build self-esteem, action plan for self-care
2	I am competent: Identify strengths and competencies, abilities, talents and qualities, and strengthen positive self-messages.
3	Expression of emotions: Identify characteristics of a HERO, learn to express emotions. Men and women experience similar emotions (gender equality).
4	Challenge gender stereotypes: Identify and challenge perceived gender characteristics and roles to promote equality.
5	Develop empathy and respect for girls and prevent abuse of girls (being a HERO).
6	Respect for women/girls: Role play, pledge to be a HERO and respect women.
Phase 2	
7	Setting goals: Revisit previous sessions, group expectations.
8	Take a stand against abuse: Create awareness of abuse, help others by being active bystanders.
9	Take a stand against abuse: Role play scenarios to prevent violence in relationships.
10	Healthy relationships: Role play setting boundaries, respecting others' boundaries and asking for consent.
11	Assertive communication: Demonstrate communication styles and role play assertiveness.
12	Healthy relationships: Circles of support. Commitment to non-violence and respect for women

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The 12-session intervention was presented at ten low-resourced primary schools in Soweto and Atteridgeville, South Africa, where violence against women is common. The participating schools served a mainly black population of low socio-economic status. All the Grade 5 boys (age range: 10–13 years; roughly 800 to 1000) in these schools participated in the intervention. Almost half of the boys (44.4%) were cared for by both their parents, while just more than a third (35.8%) were cared for by their mothers as single parents and 12.6% were in the care of other adult family members or stayed in child-headed households.

The programme was implemented in the form of a trainer-led workshop. An informal interactive style was used and the experiential learning included discussions, games and role plays. To allow identification and role modelling, the trainers were males and females recruited from the specific community where the programme was being implemented. Before every phase of the intervention the trainers attended an intensive two-week training course.

## **2. Aim and objectives**

The aim of this research was to assess the value of the intervention aimed at creating awareness of alternative forms of masculinity and respectful gender relationships among primary school boys as a strategy to ultimately prevent violence against women. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: 1) To develop an understanding of boys' conceptualization of masculinity; 2) to adjust the existing intervention to address boys' perceptions of inequality in gender relationships and potential violent behaviour before the intervention; and 3) to assess boys' experience of the intervention and how it contributed to preventing violence against women.

## **3. Methods**

The Hero Empathy Programme was implemented for boys in Grade 5 at ten primary schools in resource-limited communities. A mixed methods pre- and post-assessment design was used to evaluate the intervention (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This paper focuses on the qualitative results (the quantitative results are published elsewhere). The data collected during the focus group discussions (Willig, 2013) held before the intervention were used as a situation analysis in an effort to understand the boys' constructions of masculinity. This data was used to adjust the intervention in order to address the boys' problematic perceptions and behaviour. Following the implementation of the intervention, focus group discussions were held again to assess the changes that had taken place in the boys' conceptualisation of masculinity and gender relationships.

### ***3.1 Situation analysis***

Ten primary schools in low to middle socio-economic communities in South Africa where violence against woman is common, agreed to participate in the research. The research started

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with focus group discussions with 10 Grade 5 boys from each of the 10 schools that participated in the intervention (n=100) in order to gain an understanding of how masculinity is perceived in their communities. The coordinating teacher at each school was asked to identify ten boys for the focus group discussions, using the following inclusion criteria: 1) The boys had to be in Grade 5 and their caregivers should have consented to their participation in the programme and the discussions; 2) they had to be considered leaders among friends and be willing to express their opinions; and 3) they had to be willing to participate in the group discussions.

During the focus group discussions boys were asked about their understanding of what it means to be a man and how they perceived the relationship between boys and girls, and men and women in their community. They were also asked whether they observed gender-based violence in their community and how they interpreted such behaviour.

The focus group discussions were facilitated by two trained postgraduate students in a non-threatening environment (Carey & Asbury, 2016) and in the boys' vernacular. The discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were held during a school day in a classroom made available by the organising teacher. The boys agreed to participate in the discussions and gave their written consent for the audio-recording of the discussions. Transcriptions of the discussions were translated into English and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006).

### ***3.2 Assessing the value of the intervention***

To explore changes in the primary school boys' perspectives on masculinity and gender relationships after participating in the intervention, focus group discussions were again conducted. The same 10 boys that had taken part in the situation analysis from each of the ten schools (n=100) took part in focus group discussions one month after the last session of the intervention. The post-intervention discussions focused on different questions to assess what they had learned during the intervention and how their gender perceptions and behaviour had changed. The procedure used during the situation analysis was repeated.

### ***3.3 Data analysis***

Focus group discussions before and after the intervention were analysed through the process of thematic analysis, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). Two researchers familiarised themselves with the data by listening to the audio-recordings and reading through the translated transcriptions of the focus group discussions. Manual coding of the data was done. Codes were sorted into themes and repeated patterns of themes were identified across group discussions. The themes were then related to concepts and descriptions of masculinity identified by Hunter et al. (2017). The two researchers analysed the data separately and ensured consensus on the interpretation at every stage of the analysis. The results before and after the intervention were then compared to find proof of differences in gender perceptions and relationships after the intervention. The themes were presented in a report with verbatim quotes and observed changes were presented with verbatim quotes as illustrations.

To ensure the quality of the research results, the four main criteria for good qualitative research identified by Lincoln (1995) were used. The credibility of the data was established during

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group discussions by the facilitators, who made sure that they correctly understood what the boys said during the discussion. Since the data was interpreted independently by two researchers who went through the process repeatedly, the credibility and dependability of the data was ensured. Subjectivity with regard to interpretation was limited by creating an audit trail and remaining close to the data.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria. Permission to undertake the research was granted by the Gauteng Education Department and the school management of each school, and parental consent was obtained for all the boys to participate in the intervention and the evaluation. The boys signed assent forms indicating their willingness to participate. To protect the identity of the participants, the results are reported anonymously.

## **4. Results**

The main themes identified from the focus group discussions held with the boys during the situation analysis focusing on what it means to be a man in their communities (See Table 2), will be followed by a discussion of the themes identified from the assessment of the intervention (See Table 3).

### **4.1 Boys' perspectives on masculinity – Themes from the situation analysis**

The themes identified were the role of a man in relationships as well as characteristics typical of men, such as their physical strength, being brave, emotional toughness, that men often dominate relationships and show disrespect in sexual relationships (Table 2).

**Table 2. Themes from situation analysis**

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<b>Role of a man</b>	Provider and protector
<b>Characteristics of men</b>	Physical strength Being brave Emotional toughness Men dominate relationships Disrespectful sexual relationships

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**Role of a man.** The views on masculinity expressed by the boys can be linked to various theoretical descriptions of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Hunter et al., 2017).

“Provider and protector”. The boys indicated that they had learned about how men should behave from their families and communities. They described the responsibility of men in the community as being providers and protectors of women and children. They have to provide food and shelter and make sure their families are safe. This is illustrated by the following quote:

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“Being a man is very special in the community, because we protect woman and children from violence and abuse.”

Boys’ perception of masculinity was largely shaped and influenced by family and community, as highlighted in the following comment:

“My family taught me to do things that a great man can do, my family and people from the community.”

### ***Characteristics of men***

#### **a) Physical strength**

The boys indicated that they believed that men and women are different because of their biological differences (i.e., physical appearance and reproductive functions). Men and boys were described as being “physically strong and brave” and often being assigned physical labour that women cannot do. For example, one participant said: “Woman cannot push a car, while a man can do that.” Men’s physical strength, allow them to be dominant in relationships.

#### **b) Being brave**

In the boys’ opinion, manhood is achieved by attending a traditional initiation school with their cultural leaders, where they are taught how men should behave. During this initiation, boys are circumcised as a rite of passage to masculinity. Cultural circumcision is a painful process and symbolizes bravery to them. In their opinion, boys who had not attended an initiation school could not be accepted as men, as is clear from the following quote:

“Boys attend initiation school so that they can become men. A boy can only be a real man when he is circumcised in the mountain, not the medical one. It’s all about being brave.”

#### **c) Emotional toughness**

Boys expressed that their strengths were associated with being tough and not showing weakness. They said they received harsh treatment while growing up to make them strong and to learn that “men do not cry, men are strong”. The treatment they received while growing up was explained as follows by one of the participants:

“It means a boy can be beaten. Men are irons; they don’t really feel that much.”

While boys learned that men were not supposed to express their emotions, they observed that men do express their emotions, but in indirect ways. Men often expressed their anger through excessive alcohol use and uncontrolled violence. The boys’ observations are illustrated by the quotes below:

“When a man is angry, he just wants to drink alcohol.”



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“When a man is angry, he thinks about things that are not right, like committing suicide and beating up a woman. They lose control of themselves and beat up women. It’s for relieve for a man.”

The boys observed this kind of behaviour by men in their communities, but did not approve of it.

d) Men dominate relationships

The boys associated masculinity with being leaders and decision-makers, thus figures of authority. Boys believed that they had a higher social status than girls in their communities. They observed that some men do not really respect women. Some men dominate and control women by imposing their views on women and demanding obedience and compliance by means of coercion or physical force. This is evident from the following observations made by boys:

“So, at times men tell their wives what not to do, then women decide to do what they were told not to do. Then men fight them.”

“Some men just don’t respect their wives. They can decide to beat them (up) in front of other women, just to show off.”

The boys observed these behaviours and attitudes in their communities, but did not endorse them and demonstrated sensitivity to the harmfulness of such actions.

e) Disrespectful sexual relationships

The participants observed how some boys and men disrespected and misused girls by having sex with them although they did not really care about them and did not want to be in a relationship with them. They indicated that they disapproved of such disrespectful behaviour:

“These boys, from the get-go, they know very well that they do not love the girls whom they are giving babies (to), which is hurtful and very inconsiderate. Also, these boys, they can promise you marriage, knowing very well that they will not give you that.”

The participants had witnessed men having multiple partners or having secret affairs. They described this kind of behaviour as typical male behaviour, but indicated that they did not approve of men who disrespect women:

“Men can lie and have affairs. At times men can be dating their colleagues, which makes it difficult for the wife to realise that the man is cheating. They will keep treating the wife as a stupid person.”

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During the intervention, these results were used to form an understanding of the boys' perspectives.

#### ***4.2 Perspectives of boys after the intervention***

An analysis of the themes identified from the focus group discussions held after the intervention, revealed what the participants had learnt about alternative ways of being a man compared to their previous perspectives. They also expressed how they had implemented what they had learnt in relationships (Table 3).

**Table 3. Themes from experiences of the intervention**

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- Perspective of masculinities
  - Confidence
  - Emotional expression
  - Change in gender stereotypes
  - Respect
  - Disapproval of violence
  - Sense of responsibility
  - Challenges experienced by boys
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***Perspectives on masculinity.*** The boys' ideas about the role of a man remained similar to what they had been before the intervention. They regarded men as physically strong and brave and felt that their physical power allowed them to dominate in gender relationships and to take responsibility for providing for and protecting their families and communities. The boys had observed violent and disrespectful behaviour by men and disapproved of men who use money for alcohol when they should be providing for their families, and who abuse their wives and children. The intervention confirmed the boys' perceptions, as is illustrated by the following quotes:

“A real man is someone who takes responsibility to take care of his family. He is always faithful to his wife and never allow other people to abuse and disrespect his children and his wife.”

“Real men take care of their families and also their children. They do not have multiple partners all over.”

***Confidence.*** During the intervention boys who participated gained more self-confidence and learned to respect and accept themselves. They learned that they should believe in themselves and not be disheartened by negative criticism. The following are some of their statements:

“I learned that before you can love someone, you need to love and appreciate yourself as a person.”

“They told us that we need to appreciate ourselves and love us for who we are.”

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“We should forget about anyone who tells us that we are ugly or who teases us and tells us there is nothing good that will come out of us.”

**Emotional expression.** The boys learned that they may, and actually need to express and manage their emotions, despite having previously been told that men should not express their feelings. They need to solve their personal issues in an adaptive way and should not vent their emotions violently. They learned that if men manage their emotions well and communicate in appropriate and effective ways, it can contribute to reducing violence in relationships. This is illustrated by the following opinions expressed by the boys:

“Real men can cry and express their feelings without any shame. I learned that as a man you need to express your emotions so that you do not get damaged from within or vent your anger on the wrong people.”

“I have learned that failure to express feelings and emotions will result in men abusing women and children.”

“When you are hurt as a man you have to talk about your feelings, because if you hide your emotions the pain stays inside and you will have a stroke.”

**Change in gender stereotypes.** The boys confirmed that they had learned that boys and girls are equal with regard to their status and responsibilities, and that the ideas they had held before about men and women may not be true. They had learned that men could do chores such as cooking, washing dishes and cleaning, and that women could perform work that was usually seen as reserved exclusively for men, such as driving a bus. Questioning stereotypes had an impact on their behaviour as they realised that boys and girls can do similar tasks and that some tasks are not reserved for girls only.

“Before, I thought there were jobs at home which were reserved for girls only, but now I know that all of us can do the same things. Now I also do them at home.”

“I no longer expect a woman to do everything for me simply because she is a woman.”

“You can share duties in the house so that your wife does not have to work alone. You also need to become a hero for the family.”

**Respect.** The intervention taught boys that they should interact with girls as equals and with respect. They realised that, just like boys, girls are human beings and should be treated with the same respect. Boys expressed this awareness as follows:

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“We need to treat women and girls the same way we would like them to treat us. I have learned that women are human beings like us and therefore they also need the same level of respect we give to a man.”

“Now I relate to them on the basis of respect. I have to be respectful and understanding.”

“A real man does not insult women; they are nice to them.”

The behaviour of boys had changed as they realised that girls are their equals and that they may play with them during break time at school:

“Yes, it has changed my behaviour so much, because now I no longer feel ashamed to play soccer with the girls because I know that we are equal.”

Boys learned about personal boundaries in relationships and that one should ask for permission to approach another person, and should not force people to do things they do not want to do. This helped them to understand how to show respect:

“Ever since we learned about consent and boundaries, I ask if they want to play.”

“Don’t force anyone to do anything that they do not want to do. Also, you do not force a girl to love you if she doesn’t want to.”

**Disapproval of violence.** Boys learned that violence is not the right way to deal with their relationship problems. They claimed that their behaviour towards girls had changed and that they no longer teased and beat them, but rather play with them. When provoked by the girls, they would rather report it to the teachers.

“Before the workshop we used to beat them—now they taught us that girls are not to be beaten.”

“Now I no longer shout at them or spank them for no reason. We no longer bully them at school. We play together.”

“When I am provoked in class by girls, I just report the matter to the teacher. Previously I would just beat the girl.”

Boys indicated that their perspective of violence towards women have changed:

“Before the workshop I thought it was okay for a man to beat a woman, but now I know that real men do not beat women.”

Boys have learned the value of open communication in a relationship to address issues and to avoid violence:

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“I learned that as a man you need to be able to tell a woman if she is doing something that is wrong, so that she can understand as well. At times men are scared to tell women that what they are doing is wrong and as a result of that they end up being angry at them and beating them.”

While most of the boys expressed their belief in non-violent behaviour, some boys expressed their inability to deal with their anger, especially when provoked by a girl, which still resulted in violence:

“Now I no longer beat girls for no reason. The only time I beat them is when I am seriously angry at their provocation.”

**Sense of social responsibility.** The boys developed a sense of social responsibility and understood the need to promote a safe community by reporting incidents of abuse. They felt they had to act as advocates for the rights of women and children in their communities. They wanted the intervention to be implemented widely so that more people could be exposed to it.

“The programme must be in more schools; then violence will stop.”

**Challenges boys experienced in changing their behaviour.**

A) Peer-group pressure

Some boys had to deal with peer pressure when they deviated from the peer-group norm of being tough and bullying girls. They were teased when they started playing with girls after the intervention. Among boys there is a common perception that if you treat women nicely, men will think that you are weak or homosexual. However, the intervention empowered boys to stand up for themselves and ignore peer pressure:

“They do call us gay and less of a man when we play with girls, but we do not care because we know that we are not what they call us.”

“Previously we would feel bad when we were playing with girls, because we would be classified as gays, but now we are no longer scared to play with them.”

“Some of my friends said I was stupid, because when I am provoked by girls I no longer beat them.”

B) Boys want fairness and mutual respect

The boys stated that there was a need for mutual respect. Therefore, if girls refrained from teasing, provoking or bullying boys, boys would find it easier to treat them with respect:

“I have learned that women need to respect men and that men need to respect women.”

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“At times girls can make you lose your temper. Some girls are abusive and provoke a man and when they get what they want, they quickly run and report. So, at times we try to hold our temper, but some days you cannot and lose it.”

If girls taking advantage of the boys’ new attitude, there is a risk that the boys might revert back to their previously learnt ways of relating to girls by being aggressive and bullying them.

C) Teachers do not support change in gender relationships

The boys explained that their teachers did not support their non-violent behaviour towards girls and did not react when they reported being bullied by girls. In some cases, this lack of teacher support caused boys to resort to violence as a way of resolving differences or proving their masculinity, as illustrated by the following extract:

“I feel angry when they [the teachers] take sides, and that gives me a chance to beat the girl after school. Because she first provoked me and I am trying to do a right thing but she is protected by teachers as well.”

When they are being provoked by girls, it is difficult for boys to practice what they have learned if they are not supported by their peers and teachers. The establishment of positive gender relationships requires collaboration between the genders.

## 5. Discussion

This research was undertaken to explore the value of a short-term intervention presented at schools to change boys’ conceptualisations of masculinity and gender relationships. Before the intervention took place, the boys expressed a positive view of what masculinity meant to them. They emphasised the role of men as providers for their families. Similar to results of other studies of primary school boys, they indicated that men’s power was based on their physical strength and toughness (Govender & Bhana, 2022; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020). Family dynamics play a major role in shaping and reinforcing young masculinities (Govender & Bhana, 2023). In their communities, boys were exposed to negative behaviour by men and they observed how violence against women often resulted from men’s inability to express and manage their emotions in healthy ways, as well as from excessive alcohol use and men dominating and not respecting women. The boys’ disapproval of the behaviour of these negative community role models highlighted the agency of boys to actively participate in the process of developing gender norms and negotiating masculinities (Govender & Bhana, 2023). The boys demonstrated empathy with the victims of violence. Since many of these young boys grow up in highly violent communities, some of them might even themselves have been victims of violence (Statistics South Africa, 2023; UNICEF, 2013). In the situation analysis boys did not refer to their own violent behaviour towards girls. It was only when they indicated what changes they had made after the intervention that one gets a glimpse of the violent interaction that occurs between boys and girls. In the context,

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violence seems to be an acceptable way of interacting and how boys negotiate their power (Mayesa & Bhana, 2021). The violent community in which boys grow up and the negative social models described above could still have a negative influence on their development towards adulthood.

Through the intervention boys were exposed to positive perspectives of masculinity that confirmed their own perspectives. They were also exposed to skills to deal with their emotions and to build respectful gender relationships. Some evidence can be seen of a shift in the boys' perceptions and behaviour after participating in the intervention. The strongest effect of the intervention was the breaking down of gender stereotypes to allow the boys to see girls as their equals, to show more respect towards girls and to even become friends with girls at school. Change in stereotypes is considered an important step in the prevention of gender-based violence (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023). There is some evidence of changes in perceptions of violence towards girls, which could previously have been interpreted as innocent play (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017). The behavioural change could possibly be attributed to boys gaining self-confidence and learning to express their emotions, and to their improved ability to communicate with women. Increased confidence and improved relationships were identified as crucial in prevention of gender-based violence in the systematic review conducted by Villardón-Gallego et al. (2023). They also learned that men should take responsibility for their emotions and their actions. The boys expressed a sense of social responsibility and advocacy to promote the rights of women and girls and to create a safe community by reporting any incidents involving abuse of women.

This intervention complied with some of the success factors that play a role in interventions to limit gender-based violence among primary school children which were identified in a systematic review of thirteen similar international interventions (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023). An existing intervention was adapted to the specific context and target group, based on the result of the situational analysis of boys' understandings of masculinity. It promoted active participation and dialogue among boys in a safe environment. The intervention also contributed to the shaping of boys' gender perceptions during a period of fluidity in acquiring masculine identities (Bhana, 2005), which could be more effective than interventions later in life. As was found in other short-term interventions, the sustainability of the changes in boys' perceptions and behaviour in a patriarchal context is questionable. Soon after the intervention the boys who were involved reported that they experienced peer pressure when they played with girls and that their teachers did not support their non-violent interaction. The social norms of the community may therefore deter them from practising the positive behaviour learned during the intervention. If such an intervention is to have a sustained effect, it should be integrated into the school curriculum and widely implemented, and should also involve the broader community (Bhana et al., 2021; Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023). Teachers, caregivers and community leaders should also be exposed to interventions to influence the social norms of entire communities so that they will become positive role models for developing children.

A possible limitation affecting the interpretation of the data was that the postgraduate students who facilitated the focus group discussions translated the discussions from the boys' vernacular to English for interpretation. During their translation the specific words and phrases

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used by the boys to express themselves may have been lost as some parts of the text we analyse contained complex phrases.

## 6. Conclusion

This brief intervention showed promising results for increasing a sense of caring masculinity and perceptions of gender equality in boys from a young age. It showed that boys need opportunities for dialogue to reconstruct and renegotiate gender roles and develop more positive views of masculinity. This could contribute to equality in gender relationships and less violence against women in the long run. Pushback against the positive results achieved through the intervention received from the community, non-participating peers and even teachers was reported by the boys. This indicates that more sustainable and far-reaching positive results may be achieved if programmes for parents and teachers could also be presented simultaneously.

This intervention and its evaluation were the first of its kind involving primary school boys in South Africa. The results could be used to improve the intervention and encourage its wider implementation in schools and community groups with a view to making a difference in gender relationships in communities. A randomised controlled trial with longitudinal data is needed to determine the sustained effect of interventions on promoting gender equality and limiting violence against women in communities.

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