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Preserving Tradition and Embracing Change: A Study of Masculinities in Pashtun Society

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Introduction

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Masculinities are constructed differently across cultures. In some cultures, masculinity is associated with strength, power, and assertiveness; in others, it may be associated with humility, respect, and being in touch with one's emotions (Beynon 2002). In some cultures, traditional gender roles may be more strictly enforced; in others, there may be flexibility and fluidity in how masculinities and femininities are expressed. Factors such as religion, social norms, and historical influences can all play a role in shaping the construction of masculinities in a particular culture (Tan et al. 2013). In this paper, we investigate the construction of Pashtun masculine ideals in relation to age and education. Our main research question is: How do Pashtun men perceive and enact masculine ideals, and to what extent do these reported expressions and practices of masculinity differ between millennials and the older generation?

We conducted in-depth interviews in Mardan District of the province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan with Pashtun young men (age group 23-32) who can be considered millennials and the older generation (age group 45 and above) to determine how age and socialisation, as well as cultural norms, traditions, and societal expectations, impact their conceptions of "being an ideal man". The study's findings can help to illuminate the complexities of gender processes and their construction and change in Pashtun society and contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of masculinities across varied cultural contexts. The



structure of our paper is organised as follows: First, we outline central terms and provide contextual information. Next, we position our research within the existing literature. Following that, we describe the methodology employed for the study. Subsequently, we present our results, and in the final section, we discuss our findings.

Pashtuns, also known as Pushtun, Pakhtun, or Pukhtun, are an ethnic group primarily residing in Afghanistan and Pakistan (David 2013). They are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising around forty-two per cent of the population (Abdurahmonov 2021). The number of Pashtuns in Pakistan is at least twice that of Pashtuns in Afghanistan (Belokrenitsky 2022). Pashtuns are known for their strong sense of identity and adherence to a code of honour known as *Pashtunwali*. It is pertinent to note that *Pashtunwali* is a set of conventions and rules, that are fluid and changeable. It includes concepts such as *melmastia* (hospitality), *nanawatai* (refuge), and *badal* (revenge). It is a centuries-old code that traditionally served as the backbone of Pashtun society (Benson & Siddiqui 2014). It is a central aspect of Pashtun culture and plays a vital role in shaping notions of masculine identity among Pashtuns (Rzehak 2011). *Pashtunwali* thus provides insights into a unique and diversified cultural perspective that differs from other conservative, traditional tribal societies (ibid.), and it provides the reference points for notions of ideal man- and womanhood. Children are taught these values and ideals from a young age through the storytelling of their ancestors (Hussain et al. 2015). They are passed down from generation to generation and are instilled in young Pashtun men from a very young age, shaping their sense of masculinity (Khan et al. 2015).

One of the key concepts within *Pashtunwali* is the idea of *nanawatai* or seeking refuge. This principle dictates that a Pashtun must always provide refuge and protection to anyone who seeks it, regardless of ethnicity or background (Tariq et al. 2018). This can be seen as a reflection of the traditional Pashtun role as protectors of their communities and is closely tied to masculinities. Pashtun men are expected to provide food, shelter, and protection to guests, whether friends or strangers. This practice is rooted in the belief that a man's wealth and status are measured by his ability to share it with others. Pashtuns also emphasise *melmastia* or hospitality and generosity as a fundamental aspect of Pashtun culture (Aziz et al. 2021). Hence, the ability to provide protection and refuge is seen as a key characteristic of being a man. Another critical aspect of *Pashtunwali* is the concept of *badal* or revenge. This principle dictates that Pashtun men must seek revenge if they or their family have been wronged (Benson & Siddiqui 2014) because this is closely tied to the idea of honour. Pashtun men are expected to defend



and uphold the honour of their family, tribe, and community, even with violence, if necessary (Kakar 2004). This can manifest as blood feuds, in which families seek revenge for perceived slights or injuries and can continue for generations to avoid *paighor* (taunt) from other members of the community (Mohammad et al. 2016). Hence physical strength and bravery are central ideals of masculinity.

Pashtun society has unique historical, linguistic, and geographic characteristics that give rise to rich and complex social dynamics that determine social relations until today. At the same time, due to modernisation and social change, Pashtunwali struggles to maintain its function. Traditional norms and values ingrained in Pashtunwali are increasingly being questioned and challenged by millennials as modern life progresses and global influences reach even the most distant locations.

Hence, practices and perceptions of traditional gender roles and expectations are no longer as stable as they used to appear. Increasing levels of education, access to modern technology, and other sources of information are influencing and changing traditional notions of masculinities and femininities and ideas about gender relations (Mohyuddin & Khan 2015; Mosawi 2019). While discourses in print and electronic media about a strong adherence to hegemonic notions of masculine identity among Pashtun men prevail (Manchanda 2014), there are also more voices that contest them. For instance, some Pashtun women are challenging these traditional gender roles, and they are pushing for more education, rights, and greater equality between men and women (Jamal 2014) or more participation of women in public life (Manganaro & Alozie 2011). Similarly, it is also important to note that adherence to these traditional gender roles and ideals is not always a straightforward process. Many Pashtun millennials struggle with balancing conventional gender roles and societal expectations with their own aspirations and beliefs.

Moreover, several external aspects shape negotiations of masculinities. Western media often depicts Pashtun men as violent, backward, and oppressive toward women (Daud 2020). This portrayal is usually based on stereotypes and oversimplification of Pashtun culture and fails to consider the complexities and nuances of Pashtun society. This type of reporting also influences how these negotiations of masculinity unfold within Pashtun society.

We have observed that many millennials have different conceptions of masculinity and femininity than the older generation and they have started to build relationships in different ways. So far, there is very little



academic documentation regarding the various expressions and practices of masculinities among Pashtun men (Manchanda 2014) and how they vary between young Pashtun millennials and older generations. These generational shifts are what we explored in this study, and in the following we show that shifts can be observed and new notions and ideals emerge. This is why, in this paper, we speak of masculinities in the plural and no longer only of a singular ideal of masculinity.

This research can provide insight into how societal norms and expectations of masculinities may play a role in issues such as violence, mental health, and discrimination. Additionally, studying masculinities in different cultures can help challenge and extend our understanding of what it means to be a man in everyday life. However, it is noteworthy that this study only focuses on the Pakistani part of the Pashtun belt, aiming to investigate the constructions of masculine ideals in this specific geographical context. It provides insights into the dynamics of gender roles and expectations, contributing to a more locale-bound view of the issue. In the next section we embed the topic in the wider academic context.

Literature review

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Much of the research on masculinities, particularly hegemonic masculinities, has been focused on the Global North, with studies conducted primarily in industrialised, Anglophone countries (Chopra et al. 2004; Chakraborty 2014). There are a few studies which explore the experiences and opinions of men towards their masculine identities in patriarchal and volatile contexts in the global south (Echavez et al. 2016; Niaz 2003), however, little is known about how hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities may be disrupted or reinforced in non-western contexts (McCreary et al. 2005).

There is a lack of research on masculinities in Pakistan, with most studies focused on Pakistani and Muslim masculinities among migrants in the Global North (Blell 2018; Hopkins 2006). Men and masculinities in Pashtun regions have recently emerged as a significant area of study, following the early works that laid the foundation for this field of inquiry (Chiovenda 2020). Yet, compared to other contexts, the literature remains limited. Some research in this area has adopted a critical stance towards Western gender mainstreaming projects, arguing that the failure to consider men's perspectives has led to hostility toward gender equality among men (Bahri 2014; Mosawi 2015). This focus on men and masculinities as a source of gender inequality rather than a subject of study highlights the need for further research in this area (Mustafa et al. 2019; Chiovenda 2019).



Recent studies on ideals of masculinity and the responsibilities of manhood have contributed to a deeper understanding of the expectations placed on Pashtun men, such as the role of being the primary source of income, provider of maintenance, and protector of their families (Echavez et al. 2016). However, as other studies have shown, fulfilling these traditional duties is increasingly difficult for Pashtun men in Afghanistan and Pakistan due to prolonged violence, uncertainty, economic and political insecurity, and insurgency (Gereš et al. 2018; Myrttinen 2018).

Recent studies conducted on this topic have mostly focused on men's experiences with aggression and violence. For example, Chioventa (2019), in his ethnographical study, evaluates the effects of warfare on Pashtun men and shifts in masculine ideals. He argues that various models are required to depict masculinities among Pashtun men in Eastern Afghanistan since novel conceptions compete with pre-war ideas. Similarly, Mosawi (2020) draws attention to the fact that Pashtun men are not only offenders but also victims of gender-based violence and that honour is often considered the basis of violence. He demonstrates that honour-based mistreatment is evident and misunderstood in men's daily lives. They are also vulnerable to killings and practices that disrupt established norms, such as forced cousin marriages and early marriages. However, it is important to strike a balance between men's struggles and acknowledging the structural injustices and the oppression that women experience.

The studies discussed here demonstrate that the research on men and masculinities in Afghanistan and Pakistan is expanding, although there are still many gaps. It is a field that is still evolving, and theoretical, methodological, and contextual blind spots need to be filled. One of the gaps is the differences in adherence to masculine ideals among young Pashtun millennials and older generations (Myrttinen 2018; Echavez et al. 2016). Moreover, while some studies have focused on traditional societal expectations and the impact of war and conflict on Pashtun men (e.g., Wasai et al. 2019; Khan et al. 2019) and other studies on the role of class, ethnicity, and religion in shaping perceptions of masculinities (e.g., O'Donnell & Sharpe 2002; Khalaf et al. 2013), there is little research on how the junction of age and education shape notions and practices of masculinities in the Pashtun context.

Studies on native masculinities in Pakistan have primarily examined the phenomenon through the lens of religion and social media (Aslam 2014), with little attention given to how Pakistani and in particular Pashtun men's masculinities ideals are practised, transformed, emphasised, and deinstitutionalised. Our study seeks to fill this literature gap.



We examine how societal expectations and ideals of masculinities in Pashtun culture shape the self-conception and self-representation of Pashtun men, while more qualitative and ethnographic research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of Pashtun men. We also ask how Pashtun men's notions of masculinities vary across levels of education and age groups.

Manifestation of hegemonic masculine ideals

In the following section, we explain the conceptual framework we used for the study, i.e., hegemonic masculinities by Raewyn Connell (1995). Hegemonic masculine ideals represent a specific arrangement of gender practices that serve as solutions to patriarchal issues. This configuration ensures men's dominance while perpetuating women's subordination (Connell 1995). This hegemony is primarily manifested in normative interactions, representing the most common and valued way for a man to exist and act in a particular situation, compelling all other men and women to accept their designated roles. This perpetuates deeply ingrained gender differences (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). As Connell (1987) argues, masculine identities that hold power are constructed around the subjugation of women and other forms of maleness. In the context of Pashtun society, hegemonic masculine ideals are mainly expressed through ascriptions to Pashtunwali. As discussed earlier, this code of conduct comprises characteristics such as bravery, honour and authority, which are seen as traits of an "ideal" man. According to Pashtunwali, men must embody these masculine attributes and fulfil their roles as defenders, decision-makers, and providers. Pashtunwali's cultural relevance and deeply embedded nature contribute to maintaining hegemonic masculinities by moulding the behaviour of Pashtun men (and women) as well as their attitudes towards traditional gender roles.

Although studies have examined various aspects and expressions of hegemonic masculinities, there is a need for more understanding of the tactics, management, and transformation of hegemonic masculinities (Perez & Sasson-Levy 2015), as well as forms and strategies of resistance (activism, advocacy, and rejection of hegemonic masculine ideals etc.) towards it. Whereas societal expectations and mechanisms that shape and destabilise manhood have been studied in the sports sector (Karen & Washington 2015), on a broader scale, there is a need for more research to understand how these ideals can be disrupted and de-institutionalised. This is important because as Berdahl et al. (2018) argue, a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which these masculine ideals are constructed and maintained is necessary to critique and



deconstruct them and ultimately work towards more equitable forms of masculinities. Little is known about how these hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities may be disrupted or reinforced in non-western contexts, which calls for further research.

Apart from hegemonic masculinities of Connell (1987), studies have broadly categorised non-hegemonic masculinities into four main categories: (1) Complicit masculinities, which lack hegemonic masculinities but benefit from unequal gender exchanges and indirectly support hegemonic masculinities; (2) Subordinated masculinities, which are constructed as lesser than or deviant to hegemonic masculinities; such as effeminate men; (3) Marginalised masculinities refer to non-hegemonic expressions of masculinities, resulting from the junction of social inequalities such as race, inequality and class (4) Protest masculinities, on the other hand, emerge as compensating hypermasculine responses to social positions that lack economic and political power (Messerschmidt 2019, 86-87).

While it is worthwhile to delve deeper into these aspects, they are beyond the scope of this study. However, what is important to note is that our findings indicate that older men tended to conform more to hegemonic ideals of masculinity, while many of the younger men embraced non-hegemonic facets of masculinity in their accounts.

Taking insights from the theoretical discussion on hegemonic masculinity, the existing study explores how masculinities are perceived and practised in the specific socio-cultural context of Pashtun society. Thereby, the study helps in exploring various notions of hegemonic and non-hegemonic ideals of masculinities among Pashtun men.

Methods

To explore the constructions and adherence to hegemonic masculinities ideals among Pashtun men and the role of education and age in shaping these ideals, we employed a qualitative methodology (Creswell & Poth 2016). In-depth interviews allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of our participants. It provided rich data that helped us to explore the nuances of the constructions of masculinities among Pashtuns, especially how education and age intersect with and shape ideals of masculinity. The following sections describe our study design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques.



Sample recruitment

For this study, we collected data through semi-structured interviews in December 2022 and January 2023 from a diverse sample of 30 men (see Appendix). We recruited participants using a purposive sampling strategy (Babbie 2000) and we identified participants using personal contacts.

We selected participants based on their gender (male), education level and age. The age spectrum of the selected men was from 23 to 55 years and included persons who were formally educated and those with little to no school education, for shorthand we used the term "uneducated." We have placed those individuals in the category "uneducated" who had attended school less than 10 years of education (below matric) and who have limited comprehension of written Pashto, Urdu, and English text or were illiterate. Moreover, we divided the participants by age into two groups: The age range for the millennial participants was between 23 and 32 years, while the older generation participants fell within the age bracket 45 years and above. All of them resided in Mardan district in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. We chose Mardan city and its surrounding rural areas as the site for data collection because it is the second-largest city in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and according to the 2017 census 99 per cent of the population is Pashtun, making it more appropriate than the ethnically diverse provincial capital Peshawar (PBS 2017).¹

Most of the men in the age group 45 and above, which we consider the older generation, had no or little formal education. We did not recruit an educated older population for various reasons. First, uneducated older men are generally more reflective of traditional hegemonic masculinities within Pashtun society, which was a key focus of our study. Secondly, they represent the majority of men in their generation because in their youth, there were little formal educational opportunities, except for a small elite. These men are often considered *masharaan* (the elders) of the communities who are the decision makers as well.

Millennials, i.e., those between the ages of 23 and 32, were mainly university graduates in various academic fields. We selected this age group because these men are no longer considered in their youth, but they are also not yet decision-makers and elders in their families and communities. They are the ones who are representatives of the new millennial generation, which benefited from more wide spread education, and access to media.



Apart from age and education, we also considered the participants' residence and marital status: 14 participants are from rural areas, nine from urban areas, and seven from semi-urban areas. Among the participants, thirteen were married, whereas the remaining seventeen stated that they had never been married. Predominantly, the participants lived in joint family structures, whereas a minority lived with their nuclear family. Joint family structures typically include the nuclear family (parents and their children) and a wider array of relatives such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and sometimes even more distant relations.

Both papers authors are Pashtuns and hail from the research locality, which facilitated our access to research participants. We encountered hesitation from some participants, particularly among the less educated and older demographic. However, leveraging our personal connections, we were able to encourage their participation.

Throughout the study, we strictly adhered to ethical research protocols, ensuring informed consent was obtained from all participants. We also reassured participants about maintaining their data's confidentiality and anonymity. We achieved saturation in the data after conducting 25 interviews, but we conducted five more interviews to reach a satisfactory level of richness in the data. The average interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. The semi-structured interview guide we used included questions about factors that shape Pashtun masculinities, the experience of being a man in Pashtun society, perceptions of the dominance of men over women, and the interviewee's conceptions of ideal and non-ideal masculine traits. We encouraged participants to express themselves freely and asked probing questions in response to their answers. We obtained the consent of participants to record the interviews using mobile phones and transcribed the interviews verbatim immediately after data collection. To ensure accuracy, we reviewed the transcriptions for errors and omissions and translated the interviews from Pashto to English for analysis.

Data analysis

We chose to utilise thematic analysis as a method for data analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). The analysis began by identifying and cataloguing codes that emerged from initial readings of the interview transcripts. Inductive and deductive codes were generated and refined through first-cycle coding, which described the data about the research questions and objectives (Saldaña 2021). Second-cycle coding identified conceptual and thematic similarities among the codes, leading to broader codes that eventually collapsed into



themes. The final step involved refining the themes and comparing them to the existing literature to highlight similarities and differences. Following this procedure, we identified four broader themes for analysis that we will discuss in the following section, beginning with how practices and perceptions of ideal manhood in Pashtun society are shaped at the intersection of age and education.

***Nar sare* (ideal Pashtun men): delving into the age and education complexity**

Our findings highlight clear differences in how millennials and the older generation perceive of "the ideal Pashtun man" (respondents used the Pashto terms *nar sare* and *ghairate sarre* interchangeably). Participant age and education level emerged as key determinants of these differing views. The older generation defined the ideal Pashtun man as strong, courageous, and protective while also bearing responsibility towards his family and community. They anticipated such men to uphold traditional values, particularly the Pashtunwali code. Hence, their ideals were closely aligned with hegemonic notions of Pashtun masculinity. To this age group, manhood is not merely behavioural but also physically embodied, manifested through a calm disposition, a brave countenance, and the avoidance of traits deemed feminine. Such traits include associating closely with women, expressing emotions, engaging in activities usually tied to femininity, displaying vulnerability in public, and adopting roles that challenge traditional gender norms.

A good example is Jahanzeb², who was 50 years old and had no formal education. When asked about how he defines an "ideal" Pashtun man, he narrated:

An ideal Pashtun man does not compromise on the honour of his female family members. Also, a man should look like a man, not like a *khazonak* (an effeminate man). I feel so sad when I look at young boys who have forgotten their traditional values; it has become hard to differentiate between a girl and a boy these days, because boys are mostly *khareedale* (clean-shaven) and wear makeup. [laughing]

Similarly, when asked about Pashtun masculine ideals, another participant, Zahid, 45, stated:

This younger generation has no sense of what ought to be *ghairate aw nar pashtun sarre* (an honourable and masculine Pashtun man). They are more inclined to be *khazonak* (feminine/effeminate) and have no masculine attitudes, which used to be the symbol of masculinity in our time; they compromise their *izzat ao ghairat* (respect and honour) because they are the products of TikTok and Facebook.



Wajidullah, 51 years old, added another perspective on the ideal man. He said,

A true man maintains unity within his family and tribe and leads them. Unfortunately, we no longer value *mashari* (leadership) [of the elders], and the younger generation doesn't understand its significance. This is causing significant harm because strong leadership [of the elders] is necessary to resolve conflicts peacefully, if there is no respect for their decisions, violence might erupt. *Khu ossane zwanano k da masharano hess izzat na de pate* (But the youngsters these days have no respect for the elderly).

These interview extracts demonstrate that the older generation has very clear ideas about ideals of masculinity, and they are uneasy about the changing perceptions and practices of Pashtun masculinity among the younger generation. They expressed nostalgia for the masculine ideals of their time and were concerned over the perceived disappearance and erosion of core masculine values and the millennials' adoption of what they considered feminine appearances and behaviours. The frequent usage of terms like *khazonak* (effeminate), *khareedale* (clean-shaven), *ghairate aw nar pashtun sarre* (honourable and masculine Pashtun man), and *izzat aw ghairat* (respect and honour) in their narratives highlights the importance of physical appearance, honour, and the juxtaposition of the behaviour of the younger generation with traditional forms of masculinity. The interviews also highlight the older men's concern about a generational rift in perceptions and practices of Pashtun masculinity.

This generational shift also becomes apparent when looking at educated millennials who had different views regarding ideal manhood compared to the older generation. Most of them challenged traditional notions of gender roles and were advocating for equality.

For instance, Maaz, a 26-year-old university graduate, opined that a true Pashtun man should prioritise the financial support and protection of his family and strive for success in education and technology rather than subscribing to traditional cultural norms which he perceived to be primarily connected to being aggressive, vengeful, and violent. He further added:

Well, the definition of *nar sare* (ideal man) comes from the culture of the typical aggressive Pashtun who does not compromise on his honour and takes revenge, but I am not in favour of it. An ideal Pashtun supports the family financially and protects them and believes that we can compete with the world in technology and education, not in the gun culture.



It is important to mention here that the term "nar" is originally a Persian word, and its literal meaning is male or masculine (while "sare" translates as man). However, in the broader Pashtun context, "nar" is used as an expression of bravery, courage, and masculine attitudes.

Another participant, Awais, a 25-year-old political science graduate, similarly emphasised the importance of providing for and protecting one's family:

An ideal man provides financial support and cares for his family, who is protective and supportive. A *bayghairata sarre* (non-ideal man) is just staying in the home, not being protective, not providing financially for his family, and not educating his younger family members to compete in the modern-day race.

Abdul Wahid, who was 23 years old college student, expressed his views on the concept of the ideal man by stating:

I disagree with conventional conceptions of Pashtun masculinities. An ideal man encourages unity and is helpful, cooperative, and welcoming. Unity helps us compete with other nations, yet historically, Pashtuns have been divided and in conflict with one another.

These interview extracts illustrate a clear generational divide in attitudes towards masculinities and associated responsibilities. As captured in the interviews, the older generation, exhibits a strong attachment to traditional notions of Pashtun ideal manhood. For them, ideal Pashtun manhood is deeply intertwined with physical appearance—for instance, being rugged, visibly maintaining traditional masculine demeanour (such as growing a beard)—honour, and certain behaviours, and upholding family honour. The emphasis on terms like *khazonak*, *khareedale*, *ghairate aw nar pashtun sarre*, and *izzat* reveal their longing for the times when masculinity seemed to be straightforward and uncompromised by modern influences.

On the other hand, educated millennials exhibit a more tolerant understanding of masculinities. Rather than being solely rooted in the preservation of honour and traditional roles, they also consider it important for men to prioritise the expression of emotions, to embrace caring attitudes, and to provide for the family. They challenge the aggressive and revenge-driven ideals commonly associated with Pashtun men and advocate for the incorporation of education, technology, and societal advancement into Pashtun masculine identity. Maaz's statement, which emphasises the need to compete 'in technology and education, not in the gun culture,' encapsulates this shift in attitude. Similarly,



another millennial, like Abdul Wahid, views cooperation, unity, and being welcoming as essential traits, pointing out that historically, the focus on divisive and aggressive attributes has hindered Pashtuns from unity and progress.

***Sakht* (strict) with wife, *naram* (soft) with mother: an ideal Pashtun man in the family context**

Our data shows that the older and less educated Pashtun men were more likely to see *Sakhte* (strictness) and dominance as essential to being an "ideal" Pashtun man. The older generation defined a good father, husband, and son as one who adheres to shared cultural codes of Pashtunwali and traditional masculine ideals. In the context of the family sphere, they believed men should be the heads of their households, take all decisions, and be responsible for providing for their families. This was evident in the interview extract of one of our participants, Zafeer Gul, aged 45, who stated:

to maintain control within the family, a man should balance being *sakht* (strict) with his wife and *naram* (soft) with his mother. Striking this balance is crucial, as excessive leniency might lead to decisions being disregarded. Employing a firm approach within the family is a vital strategy for effective familial dynamics.

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Strictness in Pashtun cultural context is multi-faceted. Strict here suggests that Pashtun men should be dominant and controlling in their relationships with their wives, asserting power in decision-making regarding family and marital matters, demanding conformity to particular cultural practices and enforcing established gender norms. For instance, being strict with the wife would mean that husbands do not allow their wives to go outside the house, make independent decisions, or interact with any man other than those in the close family circle (e.g., husband, brothers, son, and father-in-law). Strictness might also include the use of physical violence in more severe situations. While being *naram* (soft) is the opposite, which means they are lenient in all these respects and, hence, submissive and obedient to their mothers. A clear distinction between wife and mother thus exists.

This stark contrast can be explained as follows: Men are expected to respect and obey their parents and to maintain a close relationship with their siblings. For the participants from the older generation, respect towards parents was an essential component of an ideal man's personality. For instance, Bahar Ali, aged 45, reported to us that:



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A true Pashtun must respect his mother more than his wife. Some people give more respect to the wife than everyone else, which I believe is very wrong and inappropriate. And anyone who does this is often subject to *da mor azari* (the mother's curse) and called *da khazee dalla* (a wife pimp).

Similarly, another respondent named Nameer Gul, who was 48 years old, made a point of saying that:

Wives must be handled harshly, or they will turn wanderers and will freely roam in *bazar* (markets). *Pa khaza aw topak ba aitebar na kay* (Don't trust your wife and a gun). However, mother's rights are categorically defined in Islam, and *jannat da mor da khpo lande de* (heaven lies at the feet of mother). As a result, you should be more tolerant and gentler with her.

Jehanzeb, who was 50 years old, shared similar thoughts;

Islamic literature clearly outlines women's rights; we don't need to look elsewhere for a definition. We have divine commandments that specify how one should treat mother, sister, and wife, and it is important to put those values into practice. I agree all women have rights, but no one can take the place of a mother.

The men of the older generation place more importance on the mother because there is a profound emphasis on the significance of the mother, particularly within the older generation. This deep reverence for mothers is rooted in cultural traditions and religious beliefs. The *moor* (mother) embodies a high position and significant emotional influence within Pashtun society. In Islam, which plays a central role in the lives of Pashtuns, the mother holds an esteemed and sacred status. This becomes evident in Nameer Gul's interview when he referred to an often-cited fundamental Islamic teaching that paradise lies at the feet of mothers, which reflects the tremendous respect and honour afforded to them.

In contrast, the young, educated millennials prioritised equality and mutual respect in their relationships with their partners and family members and were more comfortable expressing emotions and vulnerability. They rejected traditional ideas of strictness and dominance as a way of practising masculinities within the home sphere. One of our interviewees, Ali, aged 25 with a degree in computer science, stated that:

I believe the ideal man takes care of all family members, irrespective of their status. I accept that my mother has the highest place in my heart, and it will stay the same, but also, I wouldn't say I like the idea that a man should be *sakht* (strict) with his wife and children to maintain control over them. I believe everyone should be treated in a manner of respect and care.



Similarly, another respondent Ibadullah, 28, a graduate in international relations, stated in this regard:

I'm not a fan of sakhte (strictness) with wives in the family; they should be allowed to express themselves and do whatever they want since they are free and have every right to enjoy their lives. However, giving wives more space is correlated with social pressures, and people in my surrounding often label those (who gave more space to women) with derogatory terms, [such as] da khazee dalla (a wife pimp).

Abdul Ahad, aged 26, a university graduate, also had a sceptical approach to this issue. He said:

I think we should not be too rigid with females, and they should be given freedom. I mean freedom to get an education and work. However, I struggle with this. I want to educate my wife and sister and support them until they graduate, but my parents won't allow it. I don't know what to do.

These interview extracts reflect a divide and tension among Pashtun men regarding their understanding of masculinities in the family sphere. On the one hand, millennials held more egalitarian views on gender roles and relationships and supported equality of both genders. They also supported women's empowerment and education, encouraging active participation in various areas, including the workplace. They believed in challenging traditional expectations and prioritising equality and mutual respect in their interactions with partners and family members. They were comfortable expressing their emotions and rejected the conventional notions of strictness and dominance as a way of practising masculinities. However, they were aware that these ideas were not easy to implement, and an important question, which we could not study, is whether they are actually able to practice their ideals or whether they eventually give in to hegemonic social pressures.

On the other hand, the older generation held more traditional views on the performance of masculinity in the family sphere. They believed men should be the heads of their households, make all decisions, and be responsible for providing for their families. They were more resistant to challenging traditional gender roles and expectations and held onto the idea that strictness and dominance were essential for being an ideal Pashtun man. They also maintained the traditional patriarchal family hierarchy when they emphasised the role of mothers, keeping high regard and respect for them, compared to their wives.



The data also shows stereotypes about men who adhere to non-hegemonic ideals of manhood and believe in a more gender-equal family sphere. These men are stigmatised and labelled with disparaging names like pimp, and they are considered subject to their parents' curse.

The importance of exhibiting masculine traits in public spaces

In this section, we move away from the family sphere, which is often considered more private, and we explore how our interviewees conceive of the performance of masculinities outside their homes. Expressing masculine traits in public spaces was crucial to maintaining masculine identity among the Pashtun men we interviewed.

Our data shows that the older generation specifically emphasised exhibiting characteristics, such as assertiveness, confidence, and dominance, to be seen as "ideal" Pashtun men in public spaces, which are traits expected of men in many societies. The interviewees of the older generation were of the view that ideal men must prove their masculinities, particularly in the public sphere, to be accepted by their families, communities, and society. For instance, Zahid, 45, narrated:

An ideal man can be identified by his clothing and demeanour in public areas. He shouldn't resemble a woman, like wearing makeup and colourful clothes, which most of the young boys these days do. The more *shaddal-baddal* (rugged and resilient) a man appears, the more "*khaista*" (beautiful) he seems.

Shaddal-baddal (which could be translated as ruggedness) in this context signifies an individual who places limited emphasis on physical appearance, often opting for understated attire like *shalwar kameez* in muted colours, a *chador* (shawl), and a *topi* (cap) and having a beard. Using the notion of shaddal-baddal also discourages excessive vanity among men. The older participants thus placed importance on a rough and rugged appearance.

Apart from appearance, interviewees highlighted the importance of exhibiting bravery and taking responsibility in public. For instance, Jehan Shah, aged 49, was of the opinion that:

An ideal man is supposed to shoulder difficulties bravely, safeguard the family, community, and its honour, and lead them. Those who do not come forward in such times and cannot withstand the difficulty are *bayghairata* (shameless). An ideal man does not sit behind closed doors; rather, he comes forward and faces every situation with bravery.



Another interviewee, Abdul Wahab, 47, further added:

A true man should not cry; rather, he should be brave, stay strong and portray himself as a strong and real guy in his surroundings. If a man doesn't come forward in a difficult situation and stays inside the home, he is not an ideal man. This is the trait of a woman, and if he is not accepting responsibility, he is *khazutari* (effeminate).

Hence, the older Pashtun men placed a profound emphasis on the public exhibition of traditional masculine traits. They perceived the ideal Pashtun man as someone who outwardly projects assertiveness, confidence, and dominance, particularly in public spaces. Their narratives consistently underscored the belief that a man's worth is deeply intertwined with how he presents himself in communal settings. Such views suggest that among older and less educated Pashtun men, gender roles and associated masculine traits are not just cultural norms but pivotal identity markers that need to be visibly displayed and validated in public spaces.

We further found that the pressure to conform to traditional expectations was particularly strong for millennials, who felt they must prove and exhibit their masculinities to be accepted by their peers and society. For example, Zubair, a 26-year-old graduate, shared the following thoughts in this regard:

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We live in a close society where everyone keeps an eye on us. I have to prove daily to the people in my surroundings that I am a man. I have to prove it by keeping a beard, avoiding wearing specific colours, being tough, being a provider, walking and talking in a manly manner, and avoiding adopting any trait that is considered feminine.

However, the millennial interviewees were also more likely to challenge traditional gender roles and exhibit a wider range of behaviours in public spaces. For instance, Mumtaz, aged 23, graduated in tourism and hospitality, talked about his resistance to hegemonic forms of masculinity through appearance. He stated:

I don't agree with the demand that I have to publicly show everyone how tough I am or that I possess traits of *nar sare* (ideal manhood). I know people sometimes make fun of me that I am a clean-shaven guy and look like a girl; they also have issues with my hairstyle and even my clothing being too colourful and feminine. But I don't care about them.

Furthermore, the data shows that millennials who refused to exhibit hegemonic forms of masculinity in public spaces were confronted with negative responses from the older generation. These negative responses



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included bullying, taunting, stigmatisation, and aggression. Many young men also expressed that they felt pressure to suppress their emotions and conform to societal expectations, which can negatively impact their mental and emotional well-being. For example, Aurangzeb, a 24-year-old, shares his experiences:

As a person with a *naram mizaaj* (gentle nature), I have experienced many emotional moments that have led me to shed tears in public. But I have faced bullying for this because people consider it feminine qualities. There is a societal expectation that, as a male, one should exhibit strength, bravery, and support, even in difficult situations. But I believe it is not a measure of one's worth or suitability to endure hardship with bravery. Embracing and expressing one's emotions is also a sign of courage, regardless of gender.

Similarly, the data shows that millennials were subject to societal scrutiny and pressures to prove their masculinity daily through their appearance, like growing beards or refraining from wearing certain colours and adopting stereotypically "manly" demeanours. This becomes evident from the following interview extract of Ubaidullah 24, who shared his experiences in this regard:

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I prioritise self-care, often experimenting with fashionable hairstyles and donning vibrant attire. Yet, numerous times on the streets, individuals have confronted me, suggesting that my choice of colours makes me appear feminine. I've been ridiculed in public, with labels like *jenotari* (effeminate), and *hijra* (transgender) thrown at me.

Other participants in our study have had similar experiences, implying that traditional ideals of masculinities required them to suppress their emotions and exhibit hegemonic ideals of masculine appearance and demeanour in public places. These millennials felt the weight of traditional expectations, often confronting an internal struggle between their wish for self-expression and societal acceptance. However, as shown in the data, many of the millennials actively challenged traditional notions of masculinities, at least partially, choosing personal authenticity over societal conformity. They were more likely to redefine strength, for instance, by normalising the expression of emotions in public, even though there were negative reactions from the older generation.



Perceived threats to Pashtun masculine ideals

A dominant theme in the data, particularly among the older generation, was the perceived threats to ideal and hegemonic masculine identity in Pashtun society. The older generation viewed education, modernity, and secularism as central challenges. For instance, 53-year-old Naqeeb Shah shared his perspective on this issue:

The modern-day youth does not know what it means to be a Pashtun; they have lost their *haya* (modesty), *ghairat* (pride and honour), and *pardah* (veiling). Education has polluted their minds, and there is no more any difference between boys and girls. I find it hard to differentiate between college-going boys and girls [laughing].

Similarly, Abdurrahman, a 55-year-old interviewee, remarked that:

The youth of this era think they are educated, but they have no sense of what a Pashtun man should look like, what traits define the Pashtun, and how they should behave. The true Pashtuns are buried in their graves, and the modern-day so-called educated youth have no sense of their religion, *Pashtu* (being Pashtun), and Pashtunwali.

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Similarly, among older men, modernity was also perceived as a threat to the ideal masculine identity. Most of the participants from the older generation explicitly used terms like *mazhab na lare* (modern) as a synonym for "non-ideal" men and to signify being less engaged in religious practices. When we asked older participants why they perceive young people like this, Jehanzeb, 50, said the following:

Colleges and universities are modernising them, and they are losing ties with their Pashtun roots. *Khaas kr da universto wala alakano Pukhto ghairat samndar ta ghwarzole* (particularly, young men studying in the universities seem to have submerged the essence of Pashtun honour deep within the ocean). [laughing]

Similarly, Nameer Gul, 48, narrated his views in this regard:

Khaza ya da koor sez de ya da goor (a woman should stay in her home until she dies). *Khu da nan saba modern alakan ye parwa na kae* (however, the modern-day boys don't care). In my observation, more women are earning now, and their men are not bothered about it. These people consider themselves modern and secular, but this is not a real Pashtun culture.

In contrast, the millennials contradicted these views and considered education a positive influence on their lives. Most of them questioned the older generations' views that they are modern and secular and have



given up on their traditional values. Rather, the millennial interviewees viewed the adoption of values of care and expressing emotions as signs of improvement and positive outcomes of their education while also maintaining their Pashtun identity.

For example, Umar, a 24-year-old university graduate, shared his views in this regard:

I can't agree that modern education promotes secularism or that educated individuals reject Pashtun traditions entirely. Instead, education expands our perspectives and fosters a more inclusive attitude toward diverse perspectives and opinions. I believe education makes us better Pashtun men and does not defile our minds.

Another participant, Faheem, a 28-year-old who holds a university degree in sociology, opined that:

The modern education system fosters exposure to a range of ideas, expanding perspectives. This enables a deeper appreciation of our culture's positives and addresses its negatives. Some masharaan (elders) claim modern education distorts gender roles, but it broadens horizons, moving beyond strict traditional masculinity.

Similarly, Maaz, a 26-year-old university graduate, shared his perspective:

Had I not attended university, I could have held traditional views on gender roles. My education helped me distinguish between right and wrong. Displaying emotions or helping my wife and mother at home doesn't weaken my masculinity. Other people's opinions do not matter; I prioritise what's best for my family and myself.

These interview extracts highlight the differing perspectives of millennials and the older generation on the role of modern education in shaping their masculine identities. The older generation believes that the younger generation has lost touch with their traditional values, and the influence of modern education has caused them to deviate from these values, leading to a loss of modesty, pride, and respect for traditional norms. Conversely, the younger generation views modern education as a positive influence on their masculine identity. They believe it has expanded their perspectives and helped them to embrace progress and inclusiveness, making them better Pashtun men.



Discussion

The study findings provide an intricate and multi-faceted picture of masculinities within Pashtun culture, highlighting stark contrasts between millennials and the older generation. The interviews show that the older Pashtun generation's perspective on masculinity is deeply entrenched in traditional values, and they define physical appearance, honour, strength, and assertiveness according to these hegemonic traits. They consider adhering to the Pashtunwali code and traditional gender roles pivotal to being an "ideal" Pashtun man. The older generation laments what they perceive as an erosion of core values and markers of masculinity, expressing nostalgia for the masculine ideals of their time. They are discomforted by changing perceptions and practices, associating non-hegemonic comportment with effeminacy and loss of traditional masculinity. Their frequent use of terms like *khazonak* (effeminate), *khareedale* (clean shaven), and *ghairate aw nar pashtun sarre* (honourable and masculine Pashtun man) reflects the importance of physical appearance, which are seen in juxtaposition to non-hegemonic masculine behaviours.

In contrast, the millennials in our sample took a more progressive and open stance. Their views emphasised the expression of emotions, caring attitudes, and the wish for societal advancement. They challenged aggressive and revenge-driven ideals often associated with traditional Pashtun manhood. The millennials considered education as a pathway to progress and inclusiveness instead of viewing modern education as a threat, leading to a loss of traditional values.

The differences in perceptions of ideal Pashtun masculinities, as evinced by the older generation and millennials, find resonance within Connell's (2005) framework of hegemonic masculinity in various ways. This concept delineates how culturally dominant forms of masculinity are established, perpetuated, and modified over time. The older generation's perspective closely mirrors hegemonic conceptions of masculinity that are closely intertwined with patriarchal roles. Among others, they emphasise physical strength and a certain degree of aggressiveness, emotional restraint, manly appearance (wearing muted colours and having a beard) and dominance (which manifests as taking responsibility, making decisions, and standing up for oneself and the family) as primary attributes of the ideal Pashtun man. Their reverence for the Pashtunwali code, which promotes a physically embodied form of manhood, is deeply rooted in the avoidance of what is perceived as "feminine" characteristics. For them, there is thus a strict demarcation between gender roles and gender traits.



These findings contribute to Connell's classification of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities through exploring the connection between hegemonic masculinities and two other factors that influence masculine hierarchies: education and age. Previous research has suggested that older men tend to be less active in the enforcement and perpetuation of hegemonic masculinities because with older age, they themselves can no longer conform with ideal characteristics like a strong physique, sexual power, and dominance and hence they benefit less from these hegemonic notions (Eman 2011; Slevin & Linneman 2009). However, our results suggest that equating old age with subservient masculinities is an oversimplification and overlooks factors such as social status, financial stability, social hierarchies and wisdom attached to old age in specific cultural contexts like that of our study. In Pashtun society, old age is commonly associated with ascending to positions of mashari (leadership), acquiring decision-making authority, and gaining wisdom. Therefore, rather than diminishing one's status within the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity, old age enhances it. Our findings align with previous studies that argue older men's practices are complicit with hegemonic masculinities, allowing them to collectively derive benefits from the patriarchy and display superiority over women (Hearn 2011; Thompson 2006).

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Furthermore, the anxiety felt by the older generation regarding the erosion of these traditional masculine values and their unease with the millennials' embrace of what they view as feminine behaviours and appearances signifies a resistance to change and an inherent struggle against evolving norms that challenge existing hegemonic masculinity and that seek to broaden these notions, i.e. establishing various ways to be masculine rather than just one. On the contrary, the perspective of educated millennials presents nuanced views of masculinity. By emphasising emotional intelligence, the value of education, and a departure from the more aggressive ideals of the past, they offer a counter-narrative to hegemonic masculinity. While they, too, operate within the ambit of masculine ideals, they favour a more egalitarian understanding, moving away from the traditional, strict gender binary. It should be noted that our study cannot show whether the younger men in our sample also practice all these changes they wish to see. It is possible that they succumb to social pressures in certain areas and that what they told us are visions they cannot fully implement (yet).

This generational divide in the conception of masculinity is further evinced by the older Pashtun's perception of their role in both private and public spheres. The family, a primary microcosm of society, sees the older generation advocating for a strict dominance over wives,



juxtaposed with a "softer", more lenient, approach towards their mothers. This dual role highlights traditional hegemonic masculinity's intrinsic link with power dynamics, asserting dominance over their wives while simultaneously adhering to societal norms of filial piety. The public exhibition of masculinity, as depicted by the older generation's emphasis on outward displays of shaddal-baddal or ruggedness, aligns with Connell's (1995) notion of a public performance of masculinity, bolstering their status and reinforcing their dominance.

However, the younger generation pushes back against these traditional exhibitions of hegemonic masculinity. Their resistance, often met with bullying and aggression, suggests that any departure from these entrenched norms is not only viewed as a deviation but also as a threat to the established order. Notably, the older generation's perception of secularism, modernity, and particularly, education as threats to Pashtun masculinity is significant. It shows the profound influence external factors exert on the construction of masculinities. While the older generation sees these as eroding traditional values, millennials considered them as a source of progress.

While our findings provide valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge several limitations within our study. The research was geographically confined to a portion of Mardan district and thus may not fully represent the broader Pashtun community or the entirety of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Notions of masculinity may differ across rural and urban divides, age groups, educational backgrounds, and various regions within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Additionally, this study exclusively captures the perspectives of male respondents on masculinity and male gender roles. We focused on men because we aimed to delve into hegemonic masculinities from a male-centric perspective. Given the cultural milieu, opting for a gender-specific methodology was deemed appropriate, especially as, being male, we faced constraints in interviewing female participants. As a result, our research does not consider the views of Pashtun women regarding masculinity. The role women play in legitimising and enforcing hegemonic masculinities or in affirming non-hegemonic masculinities remains to be explored. Future studies should thus encompass the perspectives of both genders to attain a fuller picture of gender dynamics within the Pashtun context.

Similarly, one of the limitations of our study pertains to the gap between the expressed ideals and actual practices of the younger men in our sample. While they articulated a desire for change in traditional notions of masculinities, our study is not designed to empirically validate whether these ideals are fully enacted in their daily lives. It is conceivable that these young men may, in certain contexts, yield to



prevailing social pressures, thereby not fully actualising the changes they advocate for. This opens up a critical avenue for future research to explore the extent to which these aspirational visions of masculinities are realised or compromised due to hegemonic social influences.

Future research might also explore how Pashtun men grapple with and navigate societal expectations daily, along with any challenges or resistances they might offer to hegemonic gender norms. Potential research could also probe how these societal ideals are ingrained and perpetuated through mediums like education, familial socialisation, and the media. Through a better comprehension of these intricacies, we can craft strategies to counter detrimental gender clichés and advocate for gender parity. Hence, our findings contribute to discourses surrounding the intersections of masculinities, age, and educational level in global south contexts.

Conclusion

This qualitative study delves into the ideals of masculinities within Pashtun society, drawing on the theory of hegemonic masculinity. At its core, the research sought to discern the generational shifts in conceptions of masculinities, finding that the older generation strongly aligned with traditional, hegemonic masculinity ideals, as characterised by traits such as strength, courage, and protection—akin to Connell's conceptualisations. These narratives, steeped in terms like *nar sare*, *ghairate sare* and *shaddal-baddal*, underscore a bygone era's dominant masculine paradigm. In stark contrast, educated millennials embraced more non-hegemonic masculinities where they emphasised on expression of emotions, adaptability, and suggesting a broader, more inclusive understanding of manhood. Education emerged as a pivotal factor influencing these shifts, challenging aggressive traditional norms with more progressive, informed perspectives. The findings from this study underscore the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding masculinities within Pashtun culture, considering multi-faceted aspects such as education, family roles, generational differences, public expectations, and emotional well-being. Understanding these dynamics can pave the way for more inclusive and empathetic dialogues on gender roles and masculinities within Pashtun society.



Endnotes

¹ Based on the 2017 census, the ethnic composition of Peshawar's population is as follows: Pashtun at 89.9 per cent, Hindko at 6.4 per cent, Punjabi and Urdu speakers each at 1.6 per cent, with other ethnicities comprising the remaining 1.6 per cent (PBS 2017).

² All the names used in this research study are pseudonyms.

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**Appendix**

S.No	Age	Level of Education	Residential Background	Marital Status	Family System
1	32	Under Matric	Semi-Urban	Married	Joint
2	25	Under Matric	Semi-Urban	Unmarried	Joint
3	55	Under Matric	Semi-Urban	Married	Joint
4	48	Under Matric	Rural	Married	Joint
5	45	Under Matric	Semi-Urban	Married	Joint
6	26	Graduate	Urban	Unmarried	Nuclear
7	25	Graduate	Urban	Unmarried	Nuclear
8	26	Graduate	Urban	Unmarried	Nuclear
9	23	No-school	Rural	Unmarried	Joint
10	24	No-school	Urban	Unmarried	Joint
11	24	No-school	Rural	Unmarried	Joint
12	24	Under Matric	Rural	Unmarried	Joint
13	24	Graduate	Rural	Unmarried	Joint
14	23	Graduate	Semi-Urban	Unmarried	Nuclear
15	24	Graduate	Rural	Unmarried	Joint
16	24	Graduate	Rural	Unmarried	Joint
17	25	Graduate	Semi-Urban	Married	Nuclear
18	45	No-school	Rural	Married	Joint
19	50	Under Matric	Semi-Urban	Married	Joint
20	24	Under Matric	Rural	Unmarried	Joint
21	23	Graduated	Urban	Unmarried	Nuclear
22	47	Under Matric	Rural	Married	Joint
23	28	Graduate	Rural	Married	Joint
24	26	Graduate	Urban	Unmarried	Nuclear
25	24	Matric	Urban	Unmarried	Nuclear
26	49	No-school	Urban	Married	Joint
27	45	No-school	Rural	Married	Joint
28	53	No-school	Rural	Unmarried	Joint
29	51	No-school	Rural	Married	Joint
30	28	Graduate	Urban	Married	Joint

Table 1, Demographic profile of the respondents