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Navigating Patriarchy: A Critical Integrative Review of Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding South Asian Masculinities

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ABSTRACT

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This is a critical integrative review of theories on masculinity in Western discourses as applied to South Asian societies, which is a significant gap in gender scholarship. A purposive search was conducted in five social science databases, and a critical review of theoretical, empirical, and ethnographic research on Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh was carried out from 1987 to 2024. The following three research questions were used for the review: (1) How do hegemonic masculinity theory, Gender Role Strain Paradigm, and hybrid masculinities theory explain the construction of masculine identities in South Asia? (2) What are the local and indigenous concepts and characteristics that need to be theorized? (3) What kind of a framework can better capture the complexity of South Asian masculinities? The findings show that Western perspectives provide analytical frameworks but fail to consider issues of honor systems like izzat and ghairat, caste and gender, the legacy of colonialism on masculinity, and religious norms in shaping masculine ideals. Thus, we suggest an integrated model with structural, psychological, and cultural aspects with special focus on south Asian contexts. This approach can reinforce the concept of masculinity scholarship and culturally responsive interventions to prevent gender-based violence and to promote the engagement of men in gender equality initiatives in contexts.

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Introduction

While masculinity scholarship has grown significantly in recent decades, there are significant gaps in understanding how masculinity is created, enacted and negotiated outside of the West (Connell, 2016). In South Asia, which includes Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan, there exists a context for the theorisation of masculinities that is comparatively under-researched. Gender disparities, violence, patriarchal norms, and structures of masculinity are salient features that point to the necessity of culturally responsive theoretical tools that can inform meaningful and impactful interventions (Peletz, 2021). There is no one fixed or uniform concept of masculinity, but multiple practices and identities formed in specific social relationships and cultural contexts. However, South Asian scholarship has often discussed local masculinities from a western theoretical framework, particularly one of hegemonic masculinity. While these have analytical

significance, these can be misleading if used without critical thinking because local factors such as family honour, caste hierarchies, religion and colonial histories may also be important (Chowdhry, 2013). The contemporary critical masculinity scholarship instead focuses on how gender is relational, performed and constructed through multiple social positions: class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. From this point of view, masculinities are always changing and never fixed. Connell (2005)'s theory also establishes the hierarchy of masculinities, in which dominant masculinity is empowered and alternative masculinities are disempowered. In South Asia, these hierarchies are found to be complex and intertwined with caste, community, religion, economic status, and historical power dynamics, which creates several versions of manhood and masculinity (Chakraborty, 2014). The colonial histories also shaped the notions of manhood in South Asia, affirming specific martial, caste, political and bodily traits as better. Thus, modern manhood is more of an adaptation of the traditional to the new social context than a mere replacement. This contributes to a contextual understanding where dominant masculinities are plural, contested and culturally specific across South Asian societies (Connor et al., 2021). This variation illustrates the need for cultural and regional adaptation of western theories.

Research Questions and Objectives

This is an integrative review of the literature based on three interrelated research questions:

- **RQ1:** What is the efficacy of dominant Western theories of masculine identity construction (hegemonic masculinity, the Gender Role Strain Paradigm, and hybrid masculinity) in the South Asian context?
- **RQ2:** What are the theoretical accommodations needed for indigenous concepts, cultural specificities and regional differences as applied to the field of 'masculinity' in South Asia?
- **RQ3:** What integrative theoretical approach can better reflect the complexity of the masculinities in South Asia and yet be analytically rigorous?

This review is significant for the scholarship of masculinity in the following ways: (a) it critically evaluates the applicability of dominant theoretical approaches to the South Asia context, (b) it identifies a set of cultural dimensions that need further theorisation, and (c) it offers an integrative model that not only advances South Asian understanding of masculinities but also has implications for practice.

Significance and Contribution

The review makes a valuable contribution to the field of gender scholarship in several respects. First, perspectives from South Asia are important for the creation of comprehensive theories of masculinity, as there is a large population in South Asia. Second, persistent gender inequalities, such as intimate partner violence, honour-based violence, and restricted autonomy suggest that culturally responsive methods are needed to explore patriarchal power structures and masculine practices (Solotaroff & Pande, 2014). Third, the shift in the economic system, urbanisation, migration and globalisation have created new and evolving notions of masculinity, which are not fully captured by the established theories (Khan et al., 2022). This integrative review is unlike most previous reviews which focused on a single country or single theoretical approach, it compares the scholarship of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, and evaluates a number of theoretical approaches. This broader analysis helps to highlight regional similarities and significant differences, enhancing the foundation for culturally responsive theory building.

Methods

Review Design and Approach

This study used a critical integrative review design to pull together theoretical, empirical, qualitative, and historical scholarship and to create a more expansive understanding of complex questions of masculinities (Hopia et al., 2016). Integrative reviews are reviews that can include any type of knowledge and can be used when there is a need to reconsider established perspectives, as opposed to systematic reviews which are mainly aggregative and evaluative of empirical evidence (Cronin & George, 2023). Such a strategy was thus well suited to the study of the functioning of well-developed theories of masculinity in comparatively unstudied South Asian contexts. The review did not seek to be systematic, but rather adopt a purposive and theory-informed approach to assist critical comparison and conceptual synthesis.

Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted in the five electronic databases: Web of Science, Scopus, PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and Google Scholar during 2024. Three Boolean concept groups were used in the search: masculinity terms, such as, masculinity, male identity, gender role, men and boys, manhood, mardangi and ghairat; theoretical terms, such as, hegemonic, gender role strain, hybrid, patriarchy, honour culture and izzat; and geographical terms, such as, South Asia, Pakistan, India,

Bangladesh, Punjab and Bengal. This approach was expanded with backward and forward references to key theoretical and regional literature. Manual search was also done in the relevant publications like *Men and Masculinities*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, *South Asian History and Culture*, and *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Major South Asian universities' institutional repositories were also reviewed for dissertations and working papers. The procedures aimed to capture both the established theoretical discussion and the regionally grounded research, which illustrates the uneven development of masculinities scholarship in South Asia (Khan et al., 2022; Peletz, 2021).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies published in English between 1987 and 2024.	Studies published before 1987, unless used as foundational or contextual sources.
Research focusing substantively on masculinity, masculine identity, or male gender roles.	Studies where masculinity was addressed only briefly or peripherally.
Studies examining Pakistan, India, or Bangladesh.	Studies focusing exclusively on diaspora populations without meaningful connection to South Asian contexts.
Studies explicitly addressing hegemonic masculinity, Gender Role Strain, hybrid masculinities, or relevant alternative/complementary theories.	Studies unrelated to the three focal theoretical perspectives or without meaningful theoretical relevance.
Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and edited academic volumes.	Opinion pieces, book reviews, conference abstracts, and other non-academic publications.
Full-text sources that could be accessed and critically assessed.	Sources where the full text was unavailable.
Theoretical, empirical, qualitative, quantitative, and historical studies providing relevant evidence or conceptual insight.	Historical, religious, or empirical works used only for background that did not contribute directly to the core theoretical synthesis.

Source Selection

Purposive sampling was used and not exhaustive (Campbell et al., 2020). Results from search were sorted by relevance to research questions and inclusion criteria and seminal publications were decided after the process of citation tracking. Theoretical, qualitative, quantitative, and historical literature were included in the final literature base. This richness of constructions was significant because there are multiple conceptions of masculinity in the study of South Asian men that are related to religion, migration, social class, power, sexuality, and institutional arrangements ("Engaging Men and Transforming Masculinities to Achieve Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Stocktaking of Initiatives in South Asia," 2024; Khan et al., 2022).

Data Extraction and Analysis

The bibliographic data, geographical and population characteristics, theoretical approaches, central concepts and findings, limitations of the existing theories and proposed conceptual adaptations were recorded using a structured extraction framework. Extracted material was sorted in NVivo 14 for purposes of systematic comparison. There were three phases of analysis: Descriptive mapping is first done by categorizing studies by theory, geographical area, and methodology. Second, the findings of the thematic analysis revealed common approaches to the application of Western frameworks, adaptations to them, challenges to them, or elaboration of them in South Asian contexts. Third, critical synthesis examined the explanatory power of the theories that have been developed and their limitations and informed the development of the proposed integrative model. Contextual variations were kept in mind, and the recurring patterns and significant differences were noted throughout the process, without being subsumed to a single regional story.

Theoretical Frameworks Under Review

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

Hegemonic masculinity is an overarching concept for analysing the organisation of masculine identities in the sphere of gender and power inequality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The term does not simply mean "average man," or a "masculine type," but rather to a set of culturally dominant practices that legitimate the authority of the man and set the standards for other masculinities. Thus, masculinities are relational, where dominant masculinities engage with subordinated, marginalised and complicit masculinities. The framework also acknowledges that there is no universal pattern of masculinities, but rather, they are shaped by time and place (Hearn, 2004). This is especially pertinent for societies in South Asia where masculinity is shaped by religion, caste, class, nationalism, colonial histories and shifting social constructs (Chakraborty, 2014). Research from Pakistan and other Muslim societies also reveals that there are multiple and contested forms of the masculine ideal that gain authority at different times and in different social and cultural contexts (Peletz, 2021). Colonial interventions also helped shape and construct masculine identity, by emphasising certain notions of physical strength, military power, authority and respectability (Sinha, 2017).

Gender Role Strain Paradigm

The Gender Role Strain Paradigm provides a complementary psychological view that investigates the challenges faced by males when confronted with conflicting, limiting or unrealistic expectations around acceptable male behavior (Levant & Richmond, 2016). The concept of gender role strain can be experienced as men do not live up to internalized masculine norms, when conformity to these norms leads to negative consequences, or when a high level of gender socialization leads to long-term psychological effects. Research on gender role conflict also show links between the expectations of males becoming rigid, feeling bad in their emotions, interpersonal problems, and decreased healthy use of psychological help (O' Neil, 2008). The framework has specific relevance to the South Asian context where norms of bread-winning, authority, emotional control, family responsibility and protection of honour can put a lot of stress on men. The study in Lahore provides a good illustration of how masculine norms and patriarchal views can create experiences of tension and conflict for Pakistani men (Khan & Malik, 2023). Therefore, GRSP can contribute to the recognition of the psychological costs that restrictive masculinity imposes and continue to draw the attention towards the broader gender inequalities that form the context of these expectations.

Hybrid Masculinities

Hybrid masculinity offers a conceptual way of articulating how socially dominant men can adopt traits assigned to socially subordinate masculinities and/or femininities without losing their privileges, or gaining from them (Eisen & Yamashita, 2019). This can involve staying away from 'masculine' behaviors, embracing other styles or adopting practices that are outside the dominant construction of masculinity. Therefore, visible transformations in masculine conduct can be understood as a reflection of hybrid masculinities, where fundamental changes in the distribution of gendered power do not necessarily become apparent in a transformation of conduct.

Hybrid masculinities can be seen in the South Asian context as the struggle between the dominant patriarchal identity and emerging global, urban and consumer identities (Peletz, 2021). In families and communities, young and middle-class men can be expressive, supportive, involved fathers, or consumers of appearance, while still holding onto the traditional authority. Studies on the changing nature of masculinity in Bangladesh also suggest that shifts in generations and society can help alter the expectations of what men can achieve without breaking the existing gender hierarchy (Hasan et al., 2018). In this regard, contemporary South Asian masculinities might also transform traditional practices instead of replacing them. Men are engaged in manhood negotiations in new spaces as a result of globalisation, migration, media, education, and shifting economic structures (Iftikhar et al., 2024). South Asian masculinity can therefore only be read as multiple, situated and negotiated as a process, not as a fixed entity.

These frameworks are complementary, when combined. Hegemonic masculinity emphasizes structural power and hierarchy; Gender Role Strain illustrates the psychological effects of the constraints placed on expectations of masculinity; and Hybrid masculinity reflects negotiation, adaptation, and apparent changes in masculinity in modern society. Through their integration, their work allows for a more holistic analysis of the ways in which South Asian masculinities are constituted through institutions, culture, social status, psychological phenomenology and historical transformation. This integrated approach is of special importance as experiences from the region show that without considering the interplay between local cultural norms and broader social change processes, an understanding of masculine practices is limited.

Table 2: Theoretical Frameworks Used to Analyse South Asian Masculinities

Theoretical Framework	Core Concepts	Application to South Asian Contexts	Key Limitations / Gaps
Hegemonic Masculinity Theory	Masculine hierarchy, dominant and subordinated masculinities, patriarchal power, relational masculinities, and historically changing masculine ideals (Hearn, 2004).	Explains how religion, caste, class, nationalism, colonial histories, honour, authority, physical strength and mardangi shape dominant masculine ideals across South Asian societies.	May not fully explain the psychological consequences of masculine expectations or adequately capture the complexity of religious prescriptions, honour systems and caste-gender intersections.
Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP)	Gender-role expectations, discrepancy strain, dysfunction, psychological consequences of restrictive masculine norms, and effects of gender socialisation (Levant & Richmond, 2016).	Examines pressures surrounding breadwinning, family responsibility, emotional control, authority, protection of honour and expectations of male behaviour among South Asian men.	Its psychological emphasis can understate structural, cultural and collective influences, particularly family, community, religion and wider patriarchal institutions.
Hybrid Masculinities	Selective adoption of practices associated with alternative masculinities, distancing from traditional norms, identity negotiation, adaptation and persistence of privilege (Eisen & Yamashita, 2019).	Explains how urban and middle-class men negotiate traditional patriarchal expectations alongside globalised identities, emotional expression, involved fatherhood, changing gender attitudes and consumer culture.	May have stronger applicability to urban and relatively privileged men and may provide less explanation of rural, working-class and strongly traditional masculine contexts.
Integrated Theoretical Perspective	Combines structural power, psychological strain, cultural expectations, identity negotiation and historical transformation.	Provides a broader explanation of how South Asian masculinities are shaped by the interaction of patriarchy, honour, religion, caste, class, colonial legacies, psychological pressures and social change.	Requires further culturally grounded theorisation to explain how these dimensions interact differently across Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

Findings

Theme 1: Honour as an Organising Principle

In Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, honour was found to be a tool for the construction and assessment of masculinity. Collective South Asian forms involve men's status in relation to their family's reputation; women's sexuality; their obedience and social respectability. This has been an extension of hegemonic masculinity theory, where it is demonstrated that gender hierarchy and community surveillance and collective expectation are mechanisms of producing masculine authority (Bhanbhro, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). For the Pakistanis, izzat and ghairat are associated with mardangi, and men are expected to show their power to protect, control and defend the family's reputation. Qualitative evidence indicates that when a boy or man is perceived as weak, a loss of authority, and challenges to male control, these are all considered to be a threat to masculine socialisation (Imtiaz & Kamal, 2023). In this way honour is used as a cultural resource and a disciplinary tool. This implies the need to pay more attention to local meanings of masculine legitimacy and collective honour in Western models.

Theme 2: Caste, Class and Gender Intersections

The results suggest that caste and social hierarchy must be an integral part of an understanding of South Asian masculinities. The caste positions differentiate Indian masculinities, which leads to varying access to authority, respectability and recognised manhood. Dalit masculinities research has shown that these identities are the result of caste oppression in its various forms, including economic exclusion, social stigma, and limited public power, but also that Dalit men can experience gender privilege and caste-based subordination as well (Gupta, 2010; Mukherjee & Jha, 2022). Hegemonic masculinity is complicated by the interplay of masculine with caste hierarchy; universal applications of hegemonic masculinity are therefore problematic. Differentiated masculine ideals also emerged from the colonial classification, such as the portrayals of some communities as masculine, others feminine. Therefore, South Asian masculinity needs to be understood in complex ways, and within the frameworks of caste, class, ethnicity, and historical power.

Theme 3: Economic Change and Masculine Strain

Another constant issue of masculine tension was economic restructuring. New employment avenues, unemployment, migration and growing employment of women may undermine the provider role traditionally held by males. In the case of retrenched Bangladeshi men, loss of employment can jeopardize the identities of the household-provider and may motivate alternative ways of performing masculinity (Haque & Kusakabe, 2005). The garment sector in Bangladesh also provides evidence of the potential of women's employment to challenge gendered power dynamics and exacerbate conflicts over manhood and manhood control (Rahman, 2010). These findings further validate GRSP as differences between provider roles as they are expected to play and as they can play can create strain. Economically, though, stress is more than a mental burden, it is found in the dynamics of labour markets, family structures and in gender power dynamics. Therefore, GRSP needs to be integrated with structural analysis.

Theme 4: Religion and Masculine Identity

Religion became one important, but underdeveloped aspect of the man's identity. In every South Asian Muslim context, religious meanings are entangled with notions of provision, authority, sexuality, family responsibilities, and morals (Jeffery & Qureshi, 2022). In Bangladesh, the following features of hegemonic masculinity are recurring across the different provider statuses, physical strength, and sexual performance and control in marriage, with variations evidenced by changes in religion, migration and generations (Khan et al., 2022; Hasan et al., 2018). Religious and cultural expectations also relate to socialisation of masculinity in Pakistan and family authority. Research reveals that one cannot simply regard religion as a fixed description of masculinity. Rather, religious meaning is given on the basis of class, family, region and shifting social arrangements. Theoretical frameworks, then, must accommodate cultural and religious aspects to address how men cope with moral demands and patriarchal authority.

Theme 5: Hybrid Masculinities and Urban Change

Lastly, negotiated and hybrid forms of masculinity were noted, especially among the younger, educated and urban men. Research in Pakistan indicates that there can be a conflict between traditional authority and new demands for men to be more emotionally engaged and involved in caregiving (Aslam et al., 2022). In Bangladesh, the generational studies confirm that men still have strong identities as providers, but their attitudes toward work vary, as do their attitudes towards religion and sexuality (Hasan et al., 2018). These patterns lend themselves to the idea of hybrid masculinity theory, which suggests that men can embrace progressive practices while not giving up on the privileges that they have. However, in South Asia hybridisation takes place within a long-term family and community obligations and expectations. The overall findings inspire an integrated framework – hegemonic masculinity accounts for structural hierarchy, GRSP accounts for role-based and psychological pressure, and hybrid masculinities accounts for negotiation and change. They complement honour, caste, religion, class and colonial histories to offer a more culturally responsive account of South Asian masculinities.

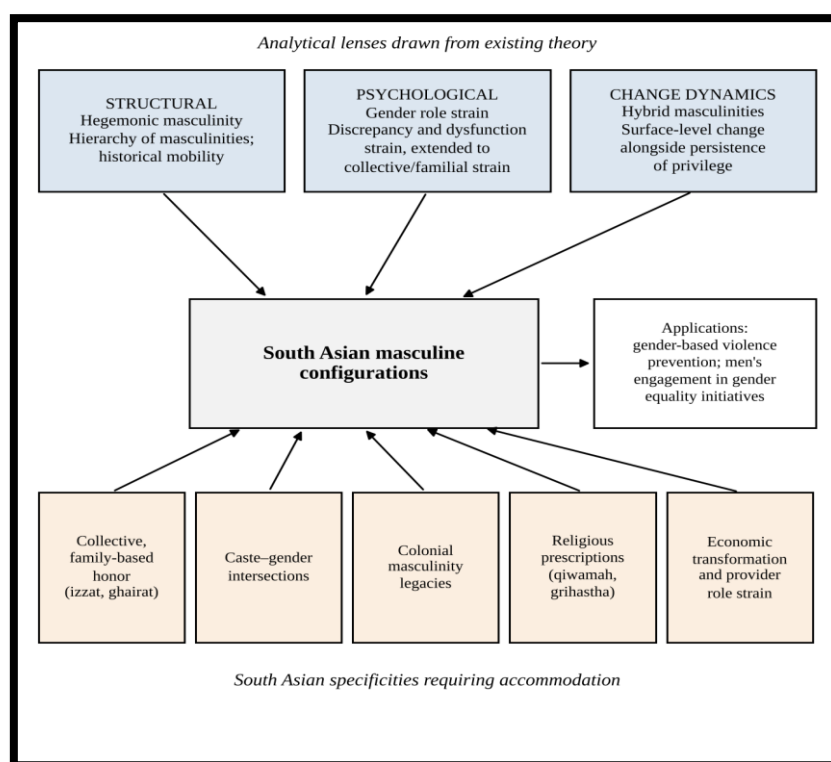
Discussion

Addressing the Research Questions

The results directly address the three central research questions. In terms of RQ1, the review highlights that the concepts of hegemonic masculinity, Gender Role Strain, and hybrid masculinities continue to be relevant for the study of South Asian masculinities, but none of these concepts alone can fully capture the complexity of the construct. Hegemonic masculinity provides an understanding of hierarchy and power, but needs to be developed to reflect a greater emphasis on honour, caste, religion and colonial histories. GRSP includes pressures around provision, authority and emotional control but is less developed in recognising structural and collective pressures. Negotiated change for younger and urban men is better captured by hybrid masculinities, and is less relevant in unequal social situations.

In the review of RQ2, the contextual dimensions considered are: honour, caste, religion, family responsibilities and economic transformation and colonial legacy and are conceptualized as key factors that need to be accommodated in theory. Honour exists as a group identity within the family and in the exercise of masculine power, and caste creates differentiated masculine identities and experiences of power and marginalisation (Gupta, 2010; Mukherjee & Jha, 2022). Economic insecurity is an example of how provider expectations lead to a masculine (Haque & Kusakabe, 2005) strain.

RQ3 suggests an integrated approach, therefore. It integrates aspects of hierarchy in the structure, psychological stress and negotiated change, with explicit attention to culturally based aspects. The evidence on Muslim masculinity also points to recognizing multiple, context-specific masculinities (Peletz, 2021). This provides a culturally sensitive understanding of South Asian masculinities.

Figure 1: Integrative Framework for Analyzing South Asian Masculinities

Theoretical Contributions

This review has three theoretical contributions. First, it offers a comparative analysis of hegemonic masculinity, Gender Role Strain and hybrid masculinities in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and demonstrates that western ideas of hegemony need to be adapted to the local context. Hegemonic masculinity needs to be considered as culturally and historically contingent and not universal (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2013). Secondly, the findings highlight the need to give more theoretical focus to the concept of honour, family reputation, caste, religion, colonial legacies and economic expectations surrounding male provision. Colonial histories are important as these influenced different notions of manhood, manly authority and respectability in South Asia (Sinha, 1997). Third, the proposed framework combines structural hierarchy, psychological strain and negotiated change, enhancing the theorisation.

Practical Implications

The framework has gender-based violence prevention implications. Interventions which do not take culturally specific masculine expectations into consideration may have a limited effect. Honour-related violence should not be dealt with individually and should consider the family and community structures. In the same way, policies and programmes promoting women's economic involvement should account for the introduction of masculine roles by providers that can lead to a masculinization of the provider household. Gender reconfigurations have been identified in Bangladesh, where changes in the economy and in generations are influencing men's understanding of work, as well as their understanding of religion and sexuality, and their expectations of the providers (Hasan, Aggleton & Persson, 2018). Interventions must incorporate the economic dimension, and address gender norms, relationships and male responsibilities. There is a need to acknowledge that masculine strain is shaped by the acquired gender ideology (Levant & Richmond, 2016).

Limitations

Several limitations remain. First, a review of literature would not be expected to include regional-language scholarship. Second, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh can't be taken to be the entire range of South Asian masculinities – the range extends beyond these three and to include Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, diaspora communities and more. Third, the proposed framework is theoretical, and will need testing empirically. Fourth, methodological differences are also found among methodologies, which makes comparisons more difficult. Finally, useful literature could have been excluded because it was not relevant or did not contribute to the theory.

Future Research Directions

The proposed framework needs to be empirically tested in South Asia for explanatory value in the future. Future research may involve the study of the process of the construction of masculinities across different generations of individuals as the social and economic shifts in expectations make an impact. Similarities and differences arising out of caste, class, religion and history should be compared and contrasted. Apparent shifts in masculinity should be examined in terms of their function of challenging gender hierarchy or reinforcing privilege through new identity performances, as has been explored in the field of hybrid masculinities (Eisen & Yamashita, 2019). Lastly, consideration of local and indigenous understandings of manhood and explanations of manhood from within might contribute to decolonization of scholarship on masculinity and to more culturally responsive theory.

Conclusion

This critical integrative review shows that western theories of masculinity offer excellent frameworks for the study of South Asian masculinities, but in their singular form are only partially explanatory. Hegemonic masculinity deals with hierarchies and power, Gender Role Strain with pressures resulting from constricting male roles, and hybrid masculinities with negotiation and change. The findings however, reveal that cultural-specific aspects such as honour, family reputation, caste, religion, economic responsibilities, and colonial legacies need to be taken into consideration. In Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, masculinity was found to be both complex and relational, and always in a state of negotiation. Masculine authority is mediated by honour, and by caste/class access to recognised manhood; economic restructuring brings a strain in provider roles; religious and generational shifts in masculine identities. These results support the proposed integrative model that integrates the structural, psychological and cultural aspects in order to gain a more contextually-informed perspective on South Asian masculinities. In summary, the review adds to the literature on culturally responsive masculinity scholarship and underscores the need for locally informed strategies to gender-based violence prevention and men's engagement. The framework should be tested and refined in future empirical studies in various settings in South Asia.

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