

NELSON MANDALA
UNIVERSITY

Transformation Office

VIEW POINT

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RESPECT
FOR
DIVERSITY

EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVE:

RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY



Mr Hlongwane Pontsho

SRPM Co-ordinator
Transformation Office

Respect for diversity is one of the foundational values of our institution. As articulated in Mandela University Vision 2030 Strategic Plan and Institutional Transformation Plan (2023-2027), the institution aims to foster an environment where diversity is appreciated, respected, and celebrated, by welcoming all identities, heritages, and life experiences. To bring these values to life, we must, amongst others look closely at how we understand gender, particularly how boys and men define their roles in society.

Naive conversations about manhood tend to be trapped in the simple, rigid paradigm - you are either "traditional" or you are "modern". Although the editorial is mindful of the ideological connotations of these terms, they are beyond the scope of this Viewpoint. In common discussion, one side focuses on keeping the old ways alive, while the other side pushes to throw them out completely in favour of something new. However, if our commitment to diversity is going to be meaningful, we need to engage in critical conversations about men and masculinities. Respect for diversity means moving past these narrow paradigms and understand that people's lives, cultures, and identities are much more varied and complexed than a simple binary allows.



Uncritical discourses treat “traditional” ways of being a man as a single, unchanging thing. People usually define it by a specific list of traits such as physical strength, emotional restraint, dominance over others, taking risks, and acting as the sole financial provider – in short, the hunter and protector. The “modern” or “non-traditional” ways of being a man are framed as the exact opposite. They focus on emotional openness, equality, mutual vulnerability, joint responsibilities in provision of care and financial support, and rejection of old gender roles and power dynamics. While this division is easy to understand, critical gender scholars warn that it oversimplifies reality. It treats the past as something that never changed and treats the present as a straight line moving automatically toward fairness.

Empirical studies point out that the distinction between “tradition” and “modernity” is rarely clear. Everitt-Penhale and Ratele (2015:8) posited that “traditional” practices can be shaped or enabled by modern inventions, economic pressures, and political needs and vice versa. Tradition is a living resource that people actively interpret, change, and use today, (Everitt-Penhale and Ratele, 2015:9). When we look at manhood through this progressive lens, we realize that human beings are active creators of their culture. By breaking down the rigid wall between the old and the new, we can begin to appreciate cultural heritage in the past and present, without forcing men to choose between the two.

Another major mistake in common discussions is treating masculinity as if it looks the same for everyone everywhere. Those who mistakenly claim that it looks the same often uncritically claim monopoly over cultural heritage. In reality, there is no single model of a masculine identifying individual. Instead, Everitt-Penhale and Ratele (2015:12) shows that there are always multiple ways of being a man, deeply shaped by a person's cultural background, socio-economic realities, and the generation they are born into. What is considered a traditional expectation in a middle-class context, looks very different from expectations within working-class communities or different cultural backgrounds across South Africa.

Even within one specific culture or family, expectations shift depending on a person's stage in life. A senior citizen, and a teenage boy all face different social pressures and hold different ideas about their roles and responsibilities. Recognising this diversity is a strength for our society. It means we stop judging individuals against a single, narrow standard of what a man “should” be and avoiding labels such as “real” men. Respecting diversity means acknowledging that people have always navigated a wide and rich landscape of cultural traditions, finding distinct ways to express who they are without undermining the dignity of others.

What is to be done?

Faced with these different viewpoints, it is often natural to take cover under the historic question popularised by Vladimir Lenin, “What is to be done”? The contents of his pamphlet might not be relevant for this Viewpoint, but the title is. It would be a disservice to our institutional values to simply dismiss cultural heritages as outdated, just as it would be wrong to assume that every “modern” trend is perfectly inclusive. The answer lies in an objective synthesis. We do not need to throw away the past entirely, nor do we need to prescribe a strict new script for how people must live outside of what has already been provided by the democratic values of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Instead, we must recognize that people have capacity to adapt and grow. Cultures have always evolved by keeping what works and changing what no longer serves the community's well-being.

A synthesised framework invites men to hold onto the positive, life-affirming strengths historically found in many cultural traditions, such as a deep commitment to family care, community responsibility, integrity, and resilience, while freely combining them with values like emotional presence, mutual respect, and open-mindedness. This creates space for true authenticity. It allows a man to find deep pride in providing for his family, while also being fully emotionally connected with his loved ones. It creates a space where another man can be artistic and gentle, while remaining deeply rooted in his cultural identity.

The role of SRPM

SRPM as a transformative initiative avoids a lecturing or punitive tone. It is our considered perspective and our institutional teaching philosophy (humanising pedagogy) that when programmes treat participants as if they have no valuable insights, or when they attack a person's cultural background, they naturally cause people to become defensive and reject the message. We are committed to creating a space where diversity is respected and appreciated while cultivating inquiring minds that will be able to identify what works and changing what no longer serves the community's well-being.

The success of any gender equality initiative relies on building an internalized, genuine respect for diversity. This requires that we make our campuses an environment where differences in ethnicity, cultural heritage, gender expression, and life experiences are actively valued and celebrated. By affirming the equal dignity and worth of every person, we foster an environment where individuals see that diversity is never a threat to their identity, but the space where authentic identities thrive. Within this paradigm, our idea of strength changes completely. Viewed anew, strength is no longer about dominating others, but about the courage to respect and embrace the dignity and rights of all people, regardless of how they express their gender.

Aluta Continua!



THERE ARE MULTIPLE

WAYS TO BE A

Man



Reflections on Respect for Diversity
in Masculinities



THERE ARE MULTIPLE WAYS TO BE A MAN

Reflections on Respect for Diversity in Masculinities

There is a moment I look forward to more than any other in our sessions. I pull a handful of young men out from the group, stand them at the front of the room, and ask everyone else to look at us. Really look. Then, in quotation marks, I ask them to judge us respectfully. Not our characters, not what we have done with our lives, just what they see. Our clothes. Our stance. The way we speak or do not speak. What kind of man does this one seem to be, and what kind of man does that one seem to be?

It is a strange thing to ask of a room filled with young people, and it always lands with a nervous laugh before it lands with something more honest. Hands go up and responses start flowing. Someone is called soft because his voice is quiet. Someone is called a player because of how he carries himself. Someone is assumed to be the tough one, the protector, the one who will not cry, simply because of his build. And every single time, by the end of the exercise, the assumptions fall apart. The quiet one turns out to be the loudest advocate for their sisters. The one assumed to be tough is the one who mentions his therapist without flinching. The room realises, often for the first time aloud, that one cannot read a man purely by his superficial appearance. There is no single way to be a man and there



Mr Junior Shabangu

SRPM Intern
Transformation Office

THERE IS NO SINGLE WAY TO BE A MAN

I keep returning to this exercise because it is the clearest way I know to make an abstract idea land in a room full of young men: that masculinity is not one thing “performed” correctly or incorrectly, but many things, existing alongside one another, sometimes in tension, sometimes in harmony. This is not a new idea, as clearly articulated by Connell (1995): masculinities exist in the plural and in relation to each other, with some forms occupying more social power than others at a given time and place. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) later pushed this further, insisting that hegemonic masculinity was never meant to describe a fixed character type, but a shifting position that different men occupy, resist, or are excluded from. Demetriou (2001) went a step further still, showing that even the most dominant expressions of manhood quietly borrow from the masculinities they claim to reject, which tells us that the boundaries we draw around “real men” were always more porous than we care to admit.

Closer to home, Ratele (2016) describes masculinities as working models rather than fixed truths, models that some men can use comfortably and others cannot use at all, given the conditions of their lives. This matters enormously in a South African residence, where the young man who grew up in a shack in Motherwell and the young man who grew up in a gated estate in Walmer are both handed the same word, man, and expected to “perform” it the same manner. Barker and Ricardo (2005), writing specifically about young men across sub-Saharan Africa, were blunt about this.

There is no single sub-Saharan African young man, and there is no single version of masculinity in our setting. Morrell's (2001) landmark collection on masculinities in Southern Africa makes the same point through history, showing how ethnicity, class, geography, and circumstance have always produced different, sometimes competing, ways of being a man in this region. Our participants are not choosing between one correct masculinity and various deviations from it. They are each navigating an inheritance shaped by their specific socialisation - where they come from, observations and what they were taught by those who raised them.

I want to be careful here, because respect for diversity is sometimes misread as a threat to the solidarity we work so hard to build among facilitators and participants. It is the opposite. Solidarity was never meant to mean sameness. Ubuntu, which carried our first issue of this newsletter, reminds us that I am who I am because of who we all are (Ewuso & Hall, 2019, as cited in Viewpoint, 2026). But “we” were never one shape. A brotherhood that only makes room for one kind of man is not brotherhood; it is a queue. The men and boys we work with bring ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, faith, and home language into every session we facilitate, and Crenshaw (1989) taught us decades ago that these layers do not sit neatly apart from one another. A young man's masculinity is never experienced in isolation from the rest of who he is. Respecting diversity in masculinities, then, is not a side conversation. It is the same conversation as respecting the full humanity of the young man in front of us.



We also know what happens when a room refuses this lesson. Msibi (2009) documented how South African men who fall outside the narrow script of heterosexual, dominant masculinity are met not with curiosity but with violence, often from other men desperate to prove they still belong inside the boundary. Hooks (2004) make a related point from a different angle: patriarchy does not only punish men who step outside the script, it starves every man inside it of the emotional life that makes him fully human. A single, rigid model of manhood is not only unfair to the men it excludes. It is exhausting for the men it claims to protect. Nobody wins when the masculinity model is built on constant surveillance of how everyone else express themselves.

So, when I stand those young men at the front of the room and ask their peers to judge them, I am not teaching anyone to stop noticing difference. I am asking them to notice how quickly they reach for a verdict, and how often that verdict is wrong. The point of the exercise was never to abolish judgment. It was to slow it down long enough for a young man to notice he was making one, and to ask himself where that judgment came from and who it was serving. By the time we debrief, most participants cannot agree anymore on who was "more of a man" than the others.

That is the space we aim to create, to stimulate young men to look at each other differently - to see each other dressing differently, speaking different home languages, having different cultural traditions and ways of being, and choosing curiosity and respect for diversity over contempt and possibly conflict.

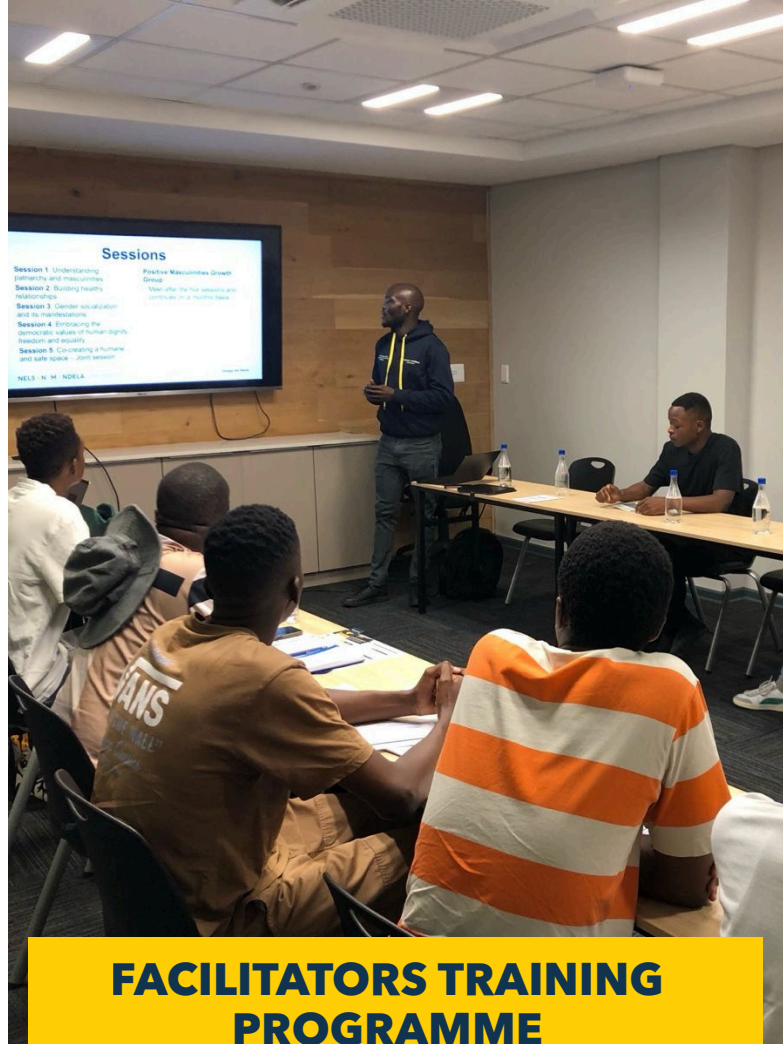
That, to me, is what respect for diversity in masculinities asks of us. Not a single new definition of manhood to replace the old, but a willingness to hold the multiplicity of being, all at once, and to keep asking whose voice is missing from the room before we decide what a man is supposed to be. If Ubuntu asked us to remember our shared humanity, this theme asks us to remember that the humanity we share was never uniform to begin with.



**READING AND WRITING
SESSION**



**UNDERSTANDING MASCULINITIES
SESSION, SOUTH POINT RESIDENCE**



**FACILITATORS TRAINING
PROGRAMME**



**SRPM READING AND WRITING
CLASS OF 2026 GROUP 1**

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SINGAMADODA?

Redefining **Positive** Masculinities

**To contribute on the next issue
contact:**

Junior.Shabangu@mandela.ac.za

Pontsho.Hlongwane@mandela.ac.za



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