

ARTICLE

# “‘Real Men’ Support Their Wives”: Reconstructing Masculinity Among Men in Rural Northwestern Ghana

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## Abstract

Although there is growing debate among feminist scholars on how fathers often socialize their male children to aspire to embody specific values and behaviors, there is limited academic research on how fathers themselves construct and represent masculinity in Ghana. This article draws on data from six focus group discussions held with forty men to foreground men’s negotiations, expressions, and representations of masculinity among the Dagaaba in northwestern Ghana. Our findings suggest that men in rural northwestern Ghana are likely to embody hybrid masculinities where traditionally hegemonic masculine ideals—such as men being seen as independent breadwinners—and contemporary gender-conscious norms—such as men as supportive partners—interact in complex ways. Yet the hybridization of masculinity both challenges and reinforces patriarchal gender arrangements in subtle ways. By maintaining a keen interest in their heteronormative breadwinning role as a model of masculinity, educated and gainfully employed men are critical of patriarchal norms that may be destructive to feminist discourses, yet their representations of masculinity indirectly embolden male hegemony in marriage relationships. Our findings further reveal considerable ambiguity in how men define themselves as supportive allies of feminist discourses by endorsing gender egalitarianism, yet none of them visibly challenges why women cannot also be breadwinners.

How might we imagine men and boys differently from how we perceive them and/or are told about their masculine embodiments and practices? The article explores this question on men’s construction and interpretation of masculinity in relation to gender-based violence in northwestern Ghana. In examining this question, we focus our analysis on how men in rural communities in northwestern Ghana construct, negotiate, and perform masculinity and their implications. We also explore how these practices are shaped by heteronormative views and increasing socioeconomic challenges in the rural context of the Dagaaba. This is done by examining context-specific conceptions of what might be entailed in being perceived as a “real man,” the normative

requirements and the barriers that need to be negotiated. In the process, what will emerge are the complexities involved in framing multiple and complex forms of masculinity in this cultural setting and how they resonate, but also diverge in some important ways, from hegemonic views on masculinities. The Dagaaba cultural groups of northwestern Ghana are predominantly male-dominant. Among the Dagaaba, decision-making power and control of productive resources and family properties are vested in male members of the family. Furthermore, the performances of masculinity and femininity are normatively expected to occur with different values required of women and men. Men are normatively expected to provide the basic necessities of the family: food, clothing, and shelter. For their part, women are required to submit to the authority of men. They are expected to complement men's efforts rather than take the lead.

The article employs key insights from contemporary discourses on men, masculinity, and femininity to help develop an analytical frame. Specifically, we draw on the work of Raewyn Connell, Kopano Ratele, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. We have chosen to focus on these texts because they provide theoretical insights necessary for an understanding of the multifaceted ways that the performance of masculinity assumes in the context of the Dagaaba despite the difference in contexts. Yet these discourses diverge in significant ways from the context of this article (and we return to this shortly). The rest of the article proceeds as follows. We first discuss masculinity and femininity as important domains within which the behaviors and practices of men can be understood. Second, we problematize how discourses on masculinity and femininity play out between men and women in northwestern Ghana. Through this, we attempt to theorize the importance of paying critical attention to cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity within a specific social environment. We then outline our research methodology followed by presentation of the findings and analysis. The final section offers some implications of our findings for the broader field of feminism and critical masculinity scholarship.

### Masculinities and Feminism

In recent years, feminist research has enhanced our understanding tremendously about the societal impacts and implications on social justice and equity of certain notions of gender (Ratele 2015; Waling 2018). Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, and Raewyn Connell's work on masculinities have been influential in terms of theorizing gender as contingent upon discursive practices (Butler 1990/1999; Crenshaw 1991; Connell 1995). These theorists and many other poststructural feminist thinkers have made significant contributions to gender scholarship. It has become extremely helpful, conceptually and theoretically, to talk about gender as deeply interlocked with multiple social categories such as race, class, economics, sexuality, politics, disability, religion, age, history, ethnicity, and context (Davis 2008; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Crenshaw 2017). Irrespective of the connectedness of gender to a combination of these social categories, global and local literature suggests that gender inequality affects more women than men of all races and classes throughout the world (Shefer, Stevens, and Clowes 2010; Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2011; Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012). Some women also have greater access to patriarchal privileges and power than others do, although this may not necessarily be on par with that of their male counterparts (Dery and Bawa 2019). Gender as informed by political, structural, social, and personal circumstances

produces durable inequalities between men and women at multiple levels (West and Zimmerman 1987; Ratele 2013). Gender inequalities shape the contours and meanings of masculinity and femininity in specific contexts.

Following Connell's work, *Masculinities*, critical masculinity scholarship has grown tremendously and has been taken up by different disciplines (Connell 1995; and see, for example, Hearn 2004; Shefer, Stevens, and Clowes 2010; Waling 2018). Critical men's studies have become an extremely important transcultural and multidisciplinary research area. Researchers continue to highlight that there are bound to be rivalries, contestations, compromises, tensions, and varying psychosocial investments among multiple forms of masculinity (Beasley 2008; Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2011; Ratele 2013; Dery 2020). Critical masculinity theorists continue to foreground the importance of context and the role that this plays in shaping the interactions between and among multiple masculinities and femininities (see Demetriou 2001; Hearn 2004). Men are likely to oscillate between different versions of masculinity on different occasions and scales because of prevailing material and economic realities. This leads some scholars to theorize masculinity as a hybrid product (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Although it is extremely important to problematize how dominant notions of masculinity discursively contribute to the overall dominance of men as a collective social group over women and other genders (that is, maintaining the normative gender order) (Connell 1999; Mager 2010; Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012), Ratele reminds us that it may be more helpful to talk of marginality within hegemony in understanding the complex interplay between dominant notions of being a "real man" in Africa and political and democratic transformation, most notably those associated with healthier and more progressive values (Ratele 2014). Ratele has encouraged scholars interested in African masculinity studies to be more critical not only of dominant masculinities, but also of those that may be described as "marginality within hegemony." Building on Ratele's theorization, we clarify that our deployment of the term *real man* in this article should be read with caution. As poststructuralist theorists, our sense is that naming some men as "real" and others as not potentially obscures and limits individual men to a static identity and social category. Due to its reductionist utility, the term fails to problematize how an individual man could effectively shift between multiple positions with equal or similar hegemony within a specific cultural context. As we acknowledge the fluidity and malleability of the term over time and space, it is at times employed in this article in quotation marks to underscore its relative salience.

Despite the range of contestations among different scholars regarding masculinities, which this article is unable to comprehensively articulate due to space constraints, it is important to mention that the concept of masculinity continues to be used as an analytical lens to foreground and theorize how social relations and power hierarchies between men and women revolve, are sustained, and are reproduced (Morrell 2001; Waling 2018). Masculinity continues to take center stage in feminist theorizing in deconstructing, disrupting, and transforming conservative patriarchal ideologies and norms that aggravate women's daily struggles. Long-standing feminist interest in deconstructing patriarchal masculinities has not always been a welcome intervention among men who hold on dearly to patriarchal norms and ideologies on masculinity (Flood 2012). Ratele suggests that feminist efforts seeking to disrupt patriarchal masculinities should not be construed as a zero-sum project that takes away the place of men and gives it to women in society (Ratele 2013). Rather, the process should be seen as offering a critical opportunity for broader imagination of healthier and liberatory masculinities among men themselves. bell hooks and Andrea Waling argue that men should

understand their embodiments of patriarchal masculinities as something that harms men themselves (hooks 2000; Waling 2018). To productively contribute to achieving the feminist aim of nourishing gender egalitarianism and democratic relationships, these scholars call for broader use of feminist theories and methodologies to facilitate thorough investigation of multiple masculinities. This involves conducting research that is empirically grounded, reflexive, and feminist-informed to unpack the interactions between dominant notions of masculinity and material changes.

From the above, one can see that research within the field of critical men's studies has flourished considerably in recent years. Despite this flourishing in Africa and globally, and the synergies that have been developed so far, we cannot be complacent in our efforts to unpack the complexities of masculinities in diverse spaces. It is within this terrain that we situate the argument in this article, which seeks to explore men's understandings and practices of dominant notions of masculinity in rural northwestern Ghana. Our aim is to bring to the fore how dominant understandings and practices of masculinity among rurally based men can accommodate and/or frustrate gender-egalitarian discourses. Feminist and pro-feminist interest in deconstructing and transforming the harsh realities that circumscribe the daily struggles of women is likely to be limited in scope and impact if we fail to adequately recognize and engage with the complexities and locatedness of men and masculinities in diverse spaces. Yet there has been a dearth of empirically grounded research that explores how masculinities are constructed, contested, negotiated, and constituted among rurally based men in northwestern Ghana. This omission in the Ghanaian masculinity literature is a significant gap in gender studies scholarship and is particularly problematic for feminist and pro-feminist work seeking to disrupt and transform problematic notions of masculinity. The current study addresses this important knowledge gap in Ghanaian masculinity literature by asking the following questions: "What does it mean to be a 'man' in contemporary northwestern Ghana?"; and "How do Dagaaba men perceive themselves differently from what they are supposed to be as men?"

### Understanding/Theorizing Masculinity and Femininity in Northwestern Ghana

Although many researchers continue to study the discursive constructions of masculinity and femininity in matrilineal societies in Ghana (for example, Miescher 2005; Adomako Ampofo, Okyerefo, and Pervarah 2009; Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2011; Adjei 2016), there is limited academic research on the meanings of masculinity in northwestern Ghana, a patrilineal society. For instance, Kojo Yelapaala's focus is on the political structures of the so-called acephalous settlements of the Dagaaba and the (colonial) processes that led to these becoming "centralized." Yelapaala questions earlier views by anthropologists—mainly Western scholars—researching in Dagaaba settings that Dagaaba societies were stateless. Instead, Yelapaala argues that the construction of the notion of statelessness was a weapon deployed by the colonial administrators to subdue the Dagaaba people (Yelapaala 1983; see also Hawkins 2002). A more comprehensive volume is Anthony Naaeke's collection of essays on the rhetorical analysis of various aspects of Dagaaba cultural practices, including how Dagaaba cultural narratives, beliefs, and values are discursively reproduced through ritual performances. Naaeke also discusses Dagaaba marriage practices, even though he does not provide any primary sources for his claims on this topic. He also engages with gendered power relations and how violence against women has been taken for granted in Dagaaba settlements (Naaeke 2010). At the time that this article was written and to

the best of the authors' knowledge, the only available study that used masculinity as an organizing theoretical lens is John K. Ganle's research on hegemonic masculinities and HIV among youth (Ganle 2016). Other studies have also discussed masculinities as part of their findings on the gendered nature of maternal health utilization among women in northwestern Ghana (Ganle and Dery 2015; Ganle et al. 2016). Even though the findings of Isaac Dery and Africanus L. Diedong have revealed how discursive constructions of masculinity are strongly connected to male violence against women, discourses on masculinity are discussed only as subtext (Dery and Diedong 2014). Overall, the existing literature does not address how men may construct, negotiate, and circumnavigate their masculinities broadly. This article directly addresses this deficit. Against this backdrop, we approach the concept of masculinity and femininity among the Dagaaba of northwestern Ghana from a "cultural insiders" vantage point with an in-depth understanding of Dagaaba normative expectations of masculinity and femininity. Our analysis is co-constituted by the culturally grounded perspectives of our respondents as well as our own lived experiences as members of this cultural group. In this way, our approach to theorizing gender relations among the Dagaaba is slightly different from conventional approaches that a Western scholar who knows little about this group of people would be likely to use. Even as we acknowledge our supposed insider positionality as indigenous researchers (see Kobayashi 1994; Sultana 2007), we remain critical about how participants may make sense of their masculinity as shaped and intersected by multiple vulnerabilities. Privileging a culturally grounded reading of the everyday masculine subjectivities of participants is not only likely to elucidate the extent of their perceived and/or actual marginalization from a wide range of socioeconomic and political conditions shaping rural masculinity, but our research is an attempt to understand how participants may circumnavigate their situated vulnerabilities and precariousness meaningfully.

Among the Dagaaba, there is a common saying: "*doo bii poge ba gang na o to.*" This means that theoretically, men and women are equal. Practically, this may not be the case as there are strict gender boundaries between men and women, boys and girls, and people whose behaviors do not conform to cultural standards and norms are punished so as to induce compliance. In everyday social relationships, boys and men are considered the major beneficiaries of patriarchal privileges, such as being heirs to family properties and making major family decisions, whereas women remain in subordinate position at multiple levels, although this trend has been changing in recent times (Ganle 2016). For example, women used to own or inherit no land among the Dagaaba (Dery 2015). Although Ghanaian feminist work has brought good news to some affluent and urban women who can now purchase or own land in their names, the same cannot be said of a typical rural woman, especially in patrilineal Ghanaian societies. In a patrilineal society such as northwestern Ghana, when a woman's husband dies, landed property is transferred to male heirs such as the man's brother(s), who may inherit the widow and her children (Dery 2015). Denying women inheritance rights over landed property increases their vulnerability as the practice potentially exposes them to various forms of discrimination, inequality, and even violence.

Gender discrimination is commonplace as most families are more likely to invest in the education of boys than of girls. Culturally, boys are normatively expected to be hard-working and to display physical strength and bravery in order to become successful breadwinners in the future. On the contrary, girls are often encouraged by their parents and other social agents to learn qualities that make for a "good" wife (Dery, Fiaveh, and

Apusigah 2019). The range of benefits that men enjoy simply by being “men” include higher education, which comes with enhanced possibilities of securing better jobs and wages, as well as reaching important positions of power in government and the economy more broadly. Women from this part of Ghana have been consistently poorly represented in national politics because politics has often been perceived as a masculine domain. The Dagaaba social structure emphasizes male superiority, power, dominance, and control, while subordination and powerlessness are widely accepted as part and parcel of femininity.

Among the Dagaaba, the local word *iibo* (literally: norm/custom) becomes an important organizing concept through which social relationships and gender boundaries are demarcated, maintained, and governed between social subjects. *Iibo* signifies the widely held views, norms, behaviors, principles, practices, and values that govern life in general and social relationships in particular. Any specific conduct or behavior that does not fall in line with the Dagaaba concept of *iibo* is often treated as deviant and unacceptable. It is common to hear Dagaaba make such statements as “*ti iibo na ni a le*” (meaning, this is not our way of doing things), and “*a dɔɔ nɔɔn iibo ba wa song*” (meaning, the behavior and attitude of this man is bad). Similarly, a statement like “*A pɔge nɔɔn yele ba viele toɔ toɔ za*” (this woman has terribly unacceptable behavior) is commonplace. Such statements are well-known and are often taken to enforce strict gender relations and comportment between men and women. Women who behave well toward men, and husbands in particular, are often praised as embodying the qualities of *pɔgminga* (interpreted variously as “ideal woman,” “responsible woman,” or “good woman”). In fact, a man who submits to his wife openly is often described derogatorily as unmasculine. Such men are often thought to be under the spell of *juju* (black magic) or witchcraft orchestrated by the woman in order to keep the man under her control. Women who challenge or talk back to their husbands in public or at home are considered disrespectful and uncultured. Such behavior could engender violence, and when a man acts violently in such cases, his behavior is likely to be construed as a culturally legitimate strategy to secure the obedience of his wife (Dery and Diedong 2014; Dery 2019a). Such women are derogatorily labeled as *pɔgfaa* (constructed as the opposite of *pɔgminga*) whereas the man is positioned as “truly” masculine.

Masculinities and femininities as practiced by social subjects are specific components of the broader gender order. The overall gender order dictates what constitutes masculinity and femininity, and individual men and women whose behaviors deviate from the gender order are likely to be stigmatized. The ordering of social practices through masculinity and femininity shape how Dagaaba men and women interact, relate, judge others, and expect some reciprocal behavioral commitment from others in various social networks. Dominant notions of masculinity and femininity are predicated on systemic and historically durable inequalities between Dagaaba men and women at multiple levels. Dagaaba men marry women by paying their bride price (Dery 2015), and any marriage relationship in which the bride price is not paid is culturally considered illegitimate. Paying the bride price indirectly strengthens the gender hierarchies and inequalities between husbands and wives in marriage relationships. Although it is important to acknowledge that the patriarchal dividend in the form of male supremacy remains an intrinsic benefit of being a “man” (see Walby 1990), it might be useful to interrogate how material and cultural changes shape men’s perceptions, negotiations, and representations of their masculinity in their communities.

## Methods and Materials

This study forms part of more extensive qualitative research on men's understanding of masculinity across six rural communities in northwestern Ghana. Northwestern Ghana represents one of the sixteen administrative regions in Ghana. The selected communities are rural with poor infrastructure. The major source of the residents' livelihood is rain-fed subsistence farming. Two communities (herein designated as FGD1 and FGD3) described themselves as "gender-conscious" due to their long exposure to gender-equitable discourses and workshops through the work of an NGO (Plan International) that operates in these two communities.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit forty men between the ages of thirty and fifty. The majority of these men had limited formal education. A few others were employed as professional teachers, but most were subsistence farmers. All participants grew up with their biological parents and had limited travel experience. At the time of the interviews, all the participants described themselves as heterosexually married with an average of four children. Throughout our analysis, participants who had been educated beyond secondary school and who were employed at the time of the interview are designated as "professional."

Data for this article were obtained from six focus group discussions (FGDs). Each group comprised at least six participants from different families in the community. Additionally, each FGD was mixed, with both "professional" and "nonprofessional" discussants. This enabled us to gain nuanced perspectives and accounts from different discussants. Interviews were recorded in Dagaare (the dominant language spoken by participants). Using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques, the first author approached and vetted all participants who expressed interest. FGDs initially focused on how participants interpret themselves as men. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, participants were asked to share what it means to be a "man" in their communities. Who is an "ideal man" and what qualities describe such a person? The first author facilitated all the group discussions with the support of a research assistant (RA). Following successful completion of the interviews, the data were independently translated and transcribed into English by both the first author and a graduate RA; both are native speakers of Dagaare.

Informed by our gender-critical interest, we wanted to gain a better understanding of how participants may make sense of masculine identities in specific situations, as well as points of contestation, ambiguity, and disagreement. In line with this, both authors engaged in thorough and repeated reading and rereading of the transcripts to develop initial codes. Some of the initial codes were: "real men" are breadwinners; "Real men" are heterosexual; gendered expectations and roles; policing masculinities and femininities; violence as corrective; social respectability; the shame of embodying failed masculinity; imagining a gender-egalitarian family; respecting the silence of women; and victim-blaming discourse. After various codes were initially developed, both authors discussed and compared our individual codes. To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings and to minimize potential biases, we triangulated data by comparing how dominant ideas on masculinity and femininity play out in both spaces across age categories. We used a thematic qualitative analysis to interpret the various codes, which we clustered into themes and subthemes. A thematic analysis enabled us to explore in depth the ways in which men may talk about their masculine credentials vis-à-vis those of other men. We took seriously men's constructions of their gendered identities as intersecting and interacting with other social categories, such as age, social class,

location, economy, and many others. Through a thematic analytic lens, we paid particular attention to how different participants across groups attempted to make claims to preferred versions of masculinity, while simultaneously repudiating others as less hegemonic.

We obtained appropriate institutional ethical approval for the study. To protect the identity and enhance the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

## Findings

We present and discuss below three key themes that connected the narratives and stories of participants:

- I. Men's constructions of "idealized masculinity"
- II. Constructing gender binaries and reproducing problematic masculinities
- III. Disrupting problematic notions of masculinity

### *I. Men's Constructions of "Idealized Masculinity"*

Throughout the transcripts, participants complained that it was becoming extremely difficult and frustrating for men to live up to traditionally hegemonic masculine ideals, including the breadwinner and heteronormative masculine figure. Participants alleged that poverty affected their negotiations and meaning-making around traditionally hegemonic masculine standards, and their narratives revealed noticeable moments of contestation, ambivalence, and tension around the boundaries of "real man" and "failed man." Overall, there was no one way of demonstrating other forms of masculinity, as illustrated in the excerpts below.

Over here, the lands are not very fertile for crop production. You farm the whole year and still struggle to feed your family. Our culture requires that "real men" be the breadwinners. That makes us who we are, as "men." If your family was starving, people would look down on you as though you were less of a man. The biggest shame is if your wife was to go to beg for food from another man. Your masculinity is sold out on that ground. (Bayer, age thirty-five, FGD1)

Bayer's narrative highlights three important themes relevant to local constructions of masculinity. First, he claims that men's ability to provide for their families signifies true masculinity. Second, his narrative draws attention to how climate change and its attendant poor crop yields is preventing men from fulfilling their patriarchal mandate as heteronormative breadwinners. Third, despite the poor crop yields, he thinks that a man's failure to provide for his family, leading to his wife begging for food from other men, creates the biggest insult and ignominy. From the excerpt, men's masculinity is not only measured by their position as men, but more crucially by their performances of specific responsibilities toward their families. Performances of these cultural responsibilities make men who they are—as social and cultural subjects. Most of our participants embodied a strong argument that their struggles to fulfill the patriarchal mandate of breadwinner and the potential stigma associated with failure to live up to this important ideal are shaped by the intersection of economic marginalization and cultural rationales around gender performativity.



The performative currency of masculinity was further underscored by John:

As we sit here, we're all men with one thing in common, the penis. You take away the penis and the differences begin to show. As I speak, I feed my family, take proper care of my wife, and also my children attend good schools in town. I'm not like those men who cannot feed their families. Men who beg me to buy them *akpeteshie* [locally distilled alcoholic beverage] here should understand that we are not equal. They are women; only women depend on others. (age thirty-three, FGD2, professional)

John's narrative highlights heteronormative masculinity as associated with being an independent and sufficient family provider. Much like Baylor, John views men who fail to demonstrate sufficient command of dominant masculine scripts as not "man enough"; at best, such men are treated condescendingly compared to their compatriots with financial resources. The latter group of men may possess a penis; however, possessing a penis is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition to guarantee equal access to the patriarchal dividend in this setting. John advanced his argument by adding that "men" may become "women" or effeminates—if they depend on others. The easiest way that a man may experience shame is to be described as "incapable" or as a "failed man" whose family is starving. These constraints to masculinity exist despite the economic strains. The statement "Men who beg me to buy them *akpeteshie* . . . should understand that we are not equal. They are women" highlights hierarchies between masculinities and femininities and among masculinities themselves. It seems clear to us that John's deployment of the phrase "They are women. Only women depend on others" is an attempt to reproduce shameful discourses that disassociate specific practices, ideals, and traits from masculinity. To transgress such normative boundaries is to become the other of one's social categorization. By virtue of his position as a professional teacher with its attendant economic capital, John is clear in his reflection that he can never become a "woman" because he does not survive on the benevolence of others ("I'm not like those men who cannot feed their families"). At once, he positioned himself as occupying a version of hegemonic masculinity rooted in conspicuous benevolence, invulnerability, independence, and being a breadwinning figure.

While John repeatedly flashed out messages of his supposed wealth, material successes as a breadwinner, and benevolence toward his fellow men, Paul, a forty-six-year-old discussant, interjected and harshly instructed John to keep quiet and stop boasting of cultural values he did not possess:

Shut up and stop boasting, you shameless man. Who are you calling a woman here? You don't feed anyone here. When people are talking about "real men" in this community, do you also see yourself as one? When did you become a "real man"?

John, who had hitherto attempted to dominate the group discussion, became silent and visibly disturbed. He occasionally cleared his throat as though something had choked him. But Paul continued to launch a strong attack on the supposed masculine credentials that John had arrogated to himself:

If you're a man as you claim, tell everyone here whether you've paid for your wife's bride price and yet you're here calling yourself a man [husband]. You become a

“nobody” today if her family takes her away. You’ve married her on credit, and you won’t keep quiet when “real men” are talking. You’re a father of “illegal children.”

Within the hierarchy of masculinity, participants such as Paul had an idea as to where to place adult men who are unmarried, or who are married without paying the bride price of their wives vis-à-vis those men who are duly married. For most discussants, John was not as “masculine” as he initially claimed to be; after all, he had not paid the bride price of his wife, an important milestone that defines and affords heteronormative masculinity its legitimacy. Within this cultural context, it seems clear to us that a man’s ability to fulfill this culturally important obligation further enhances his credibility and legitimacy as a “real man” and not any “common man.” Paradoxically, a man can be materially rich, which may enable him to perform his responsibilities as a breadwinner, but failure to meet the cultural mandate of paying the bride price for his wife casts serious doubt about his fatherhood status, as illustrated by Paul’s rather harsh words, “You’re a father of illegal children.” By local standards, John was widely perceived as “less of a man” despite his disclaimer that “I’m not like those men who cannot feed their families.” Dakurah explained this in much detail:

A man who has not paid his wife’s bride price does not come close when we’re talking about “real men.” Not at all! In our culture, if a man does not pay the bride price of his wife, he cannot control her because you’ve not properly married her. She can decide to disrespect and even insult you, but you cannot do anything about it. (thirty-four years old, FGD2, professional)

This excerpt highlights how heteronormative marriage creates compelling masculine hierarchies between men and women and among men themselves. In the interests of deepening the hegemony of heteronormative masculinities and femininities while subverting and repudiating other forms of sexual relationships, unmarried men of certain ages irrespective of their material wealth are not likely to be considered adult enough per cultural standards. Such men are unlikely to have equal access to patriarchal cultural privileges that married people supposedly easily access, such as privileges of legitimate fatherhood and social respectability. Among the Dagaaba, it is widely believed that a marriage becomes officially recognized only when the bride price has been paid to the bride’s family (Goody 1969; Kpiebaya 1991; Hawkins 2002; Dery 2015; Akurugu 2019). Bride price could involve the transfer of cash and material goods such as drinks, cattle, sheep, and others to the bride’s family. Similar to other patrilineal societies, the Dagaaba believe that transferring some or all of these items to the bride’s family entitles husbands to the sexuality and labor of the wife (for example, see Goody and Buckley 1973). Following from this marriage payment, any children born within the union belong to the man and his agnatic kin. By contrast, children begotten outside of a customarily sanctioned marriage are considered to be “illegitimate.” Against this backdrop, legitimate sexual exchanges could be meaningful only when done in a properly married relationship. This led some participants to describe John’s relationship as “marriage on credit.” This description may sound mundane, but in the social meaning-making and organization of the Dagaaba, this is very demeaning, and arguably, the worst insult an adult man can receive and cannot easily forget. This may account for John’s silence. John’s claim of responsible fatherhood was immediately questioned, and his masculinity arguably compromised; he was likened to an “ordinary” man (“a nobody”).

What is also very important to us as gender-critical scholars is how participants talked about patriarchy and its associated undercurrents and the possibility of imagining gender transformation within this context. For example, it was articulated how patriarchal practices reinforce gender binaries and unequal power dynamics within heteronormative marriages. Being in a properly defined, heteronormative marriage gives husbands patriarchal privileges and moral authority to exert control over their wives and not vice versa. Men who are not “properly” married may not have the moral grounds to complain if they are disrespected by their wives. Indeed, it is almost obvious to deduce from the narratives of our participants that nobody would be interested in listening to such complaints of disrespect and insults because the man has failed to be a “real man” in the eyes of the community.

## *II. Constructing Gender Binaries and Reproducing Problematic Masculinities*

The men we worked with often talked about their masculinity in relation to femininity: things that women are expected to do. For example, across groups, men believed that they deserve respect from their wives because all their struggles are geared toward making their families happy. One important way that men expressed this expectation from their wives was that women must always submit to their patriarchal authority. Women were also expected to ensure that meals were always prepared and on time. Cooking or anything to do with kitchen work was perceived as “feminine,” and “real men” do not associate themselves with such activities. Seeking to know more about the gendered division of labor, we decided to use a vignette to find out how men would react to a scenario that potentially disrupts the gendering of roles and spaces. In the vignette, we narrated the story of a man who had returned from a drinking expedition in the evening hungry and exhausted. He had given his wife some housekeeping money (known in Ghanaian parlance as “chop money”) to buy soup ingredients from the village market to prepare a meal for the family. She did not prepare any meal and the money was nowhere to be found. The wife was unapologetic about her behavior. Participants were asked to share their thoughts and reflections on how they would feel and react if they were in the position of this man.

Men’s responses to this vignette were mixed. Most participants suggested that when a woman fails to abide by the cultural obligations inherent in marriage, it could create potential ground for problematic behaviors, including violence, to flourish:

The best way to the heart of a man is through his stomach. When the stomach is empty, a man cannot think properly. He can easily become angry. . . I mean he can go crazy. If he beats the wife in this case, people will support him because we all know that a “hungry man is an angry man.” The woman caused him to be angry. If she had prepared the food, there wouldn’t be anything like that. [By beating,] the man only sought to correct her bad behavior. (Luke, forty years old, FGD1, professional)

Men’s overwhelming sanction of anger and normalization of violence as a form of masculine expression when a woman fails to live up to gendered expectations was commonly articulated across groups. Within the cultural context in which this study was conducted, such narratives were further elaborated and supported by the breadwinner discourse:

You are also a man [referring to the first author], tell me if you will leave her like that [without beating]? At least your father should have taught you what to do in such scenarios: teach her a lesson. If I had not provided her with money, that would have been my fault. I've given her money and yet she refused to prepare food for me? What does she expect me to do? To cook for myself or sleep on an empty stomach? Why did I marry her? I am not the sort of man to mess up with. (Eddie, fifty years old, FGD6)

In this narrative, Eddie justified the use of violence in the situation in which a woman is perceived to violate cultural standards that police masculinity and femininity. He equates the use of violence to teaching a woman a "lesson." By virtue of the privileges associated with men as heteronormative breadwinners, it is a cultural taboo for them to cook. On the contrary, a woman who fails to cook indirectly expects her husband to do what he is culturally barred from doing. Within this cultural context, men marry women, and this cultural arrangement and its associated performativities are taken to mean that men are entitled to the labor of women. In the event that such entitlements are perceived to be unmet, it becomes almost obvious and even warranted to exercise masculine authority through violence.

One of the pernicious explanations that was also strongly articulated by most participants was patriarchal stereotypes. Patriarchal myths and stereotypes about the position of a man and woman in intimate relationships significantly disadvantage women and exonerate and almost always trivialize the behavior of men even if such behaviors are problematic. One such stereotype is the explanation of the cultural taboos that prohibit men from cooking. The cultural taboo that forbids men from engaging in domestic chores is predicated on the belief that men will go mad if they were to cook. By failing to cook, as the woman in the vignette supposedly did, is to challenge the very logic of patriarchy embedded in heteronormative relationships, and this elicits the question: "Why did I marry her?" This symbolic questioning of patriarchy in the behavior of a woman should be of great concern to husbands who have a vested interest in avoiding being "messed up" by the supposedly "disruptive" behavior of his wife.

From ongoing discussion, we became concerned that participants' adherence to rigid patriarchal stereotypes seeks to reproduce three basic functions, namely: blaming women for being abused ("The woman caused him to be angry"); second, positioning the problematic behaviors of men as naturally inevitable in specific circumstances because such behaviors ensure social balance; and last, men's violence against women is a manifestation of a version of hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes dominance and control over women. Society reinforces these patriarchal stereotypes in various ways by sanctioning acts that put women in a subservient position as the prerogative of legitimate husbandhood. Patriarchal stereotypes and myths are deeply woven into the larger social fiber that encourages "real men" to strive for a version of hegemonic masculinity thoroughly rooted in control, power, dominance, and violence in marriages (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Jewkes et al. 2016; Dery 2019b).

The problematic belief that "real men" should act in controlling and dominating ways toward their wives in order to induce compliance may not be entirely new (Dery 2019b). Participants recognized that fathers play a crucial role in shaping the ideological views of future generations, especially training boys in the sort of behaviors required in specific circumstances. This should be of great concern to us, especially how

men who grew up in the same place are naturally expected to equip themselves with relevant knowledge about what behavioral commitment to invest in, in specific circumstances. “You are also a man, tell me if you will leave her like that? At least your father should have taught you what to do in such scenarios” is extremely problematic. The statement draws on an essentialized discourse to construct all men as potentially problematic and as an unchangeable group. Understandably, when a woman makes her husband angry, the best reaction in this cultural setting is an expectation that a “real man” “teaches her a useful lesson.” These narratives are very important as they reveal men’s lack of respect and empathy for women in heteronormative marriages. It emerged that most men in this study are likely to endorse physical intimate violence against women in the extreme case in which the boundary between masculinity and femininity is perceived to be destabilized and challenged. Most men are highly likely to endorse acts that are more socially and culturally appropriate, such as “teaching women lessons” whenever their gender performances fail to meet marital expectations. The narratives of most participants can be understood as occupying a subordinate and relatively powerless masculinity fueled by increasing economic marginalization and poor crop yields vis-à-vis the more hegemonic masculinity of a successful breadwinner. In the context in which men’s masculinity is shaped by multiple vulnerabilities and extremely precarious livelihood strategies, acts of violence and other forms of dominating behavior could be deployed to reestablish and restore balance (Ratele 2013; Dery 2019b). Even as most participants articulated enormous difficulties in achieving dominant milestones associated with hegemonic masculinity, including struggling to be sufficient providers—a major risk factor that may invite acts of violence—this does not preclude the existence of other forms of masculinity among men as discussed in the next section.

### *III. Disrupting Problematic Notions of Masculinity*

In some groups, some of the participants (mostly educated and gainfully employed men) contested the notion of gender binaries in a manner in which resistance and compliance were combined in complex ways. For a number of the men, masculinities were likely to be enhanced when they reflected on the consequences of their actions in specific situations. Using the same vignette illustrated above, some participants suggested that this scenario could offer a useful possibility to begin to imagine democratic and more progressive relationships:

Men are the breadwinners of every family. There is no doubt about that. But in this case, the man should care to know why the woman has not cooked. Maybe something is wrong with her. You need to respect her silence. Find out whether she is well or something. If you had stopped going to drink and assisted her, like you could have eaten early. You could have even been the first to taste the food. (Lazarus, thirty-two years old, FGD1, professional)

Charles explained further:

Time has changed, and we now talk of women being equal to men. For me, nothing prevents a man from cooking. Men are the breadwinners, but a man does not lose anything by supporting his wife to cook. If I were the one, I would even cook and serve her. That will deepen your love. (thirty-five years old, FGD3, professional)

Richard added:

Being a breadwinner myself, I always tell my friends that men do not lose a single hair by helping their wives. Time has changed, and men also need to change our thinking. Even the Bible said a husband and wife should support each other. When you support her, there is always happiness, joy, and peace in your home (thirty-three years old, FGD4, church leader).

The narratives above offer us an opportunity to understand that even in a context in which gendered division of labor is rigidly enforced, it is possible to imagine more egalitarian, pro-feminist masculinities. Contributing to pro-feminist masculine subjectivities, such progressive imaginations are largely attributable to participants' employment status, exposure to gender-critical discourses, workshops carried out by Plan International, and level of education. These are key ingredients that supposedly gave such men the "luxury" to entertain egalitarian ideals without feeling significantly threatened in their position as men.

We also suggest that part of the answer to why these minority men could imagine pro-feminist masculine subjectivities lies in how marriage is differently constructed among different men and how marriage could be used to foster gender equality. Marriage enhances men's power by increasing their control over female labor, but different men are likely to approach this patriarchal privilege differently. For such participants, embracing gender-equitable discourses comes at no tangible cost to men and their masculinity, illustrated by Richard's comment: "I always tell my friends that men do not lose a single hair by helping your wife." Such participants propose that men should develop the habit of care and respect toward women when issues that hurt women are not verbally communicated. This call for a new conception of breadwinning in a context where rigid gender binaries are prevalent is important for a few reasons. Notable is that this new thinking on what it means to be a "real man" has the potential to precipitate shifts in how men approach their relationships with women, and their own masculine identities in intimate relationships. In fact, participants admit that men who support their wives contribute to developing a culture that breeds happiness, joy, and peace.

It is equally important to highlight how participants draw on the changing trends of time and how this potentially shapes alternative thinking about masculinity and femininity. In establishing the links between contemporary discourses on gender-equitable subjectivities and the benefits associated with feminist egalitarian values, these men in turn, most obviously, draw our attention to the emergence of the culture of "new men." Although we cannot authenticate whether they truly practice what they thought to be gender-critical thinking through our short stay and interactions with them, such men position themselves as being different from other men who will more likely engage in problematic behaviors toward the woman whose behavior transgresses dominant feminine scripts. More crucially, in connecting their narratives to the changing trend of time and biblical messages, two very important traditions emerged. On the one hand, we see participants articulating their masculinity through the lens of cultural rationales. Culturally, men are viewed as heteronormative breadwinners and heads of household who have power to control women. This discourse was strongly articulated among both categories of men in our study. On the other hand, we see an obvious deployment of pro-feminist values and ideals that respect and nurture caring and supportive relationships. Although this argument was evident among a few discussants, we

anticipate that these minority men are beginning to become gender-conscious and sensitive to the plight of women by taking the silence of women seriously.

### Implications of Dagaaba Conceptions of Masculinity for Feminist Theorizing

Taking the findings from this study, the concept of hegemony—of men always needing to maintain masculine face and dominance—emerged as an important thread that binds participants' narratives in complex ways. Men enhanced their masculine dominance and power over women through marriage, an important institution that bequeaths moral authority to men over women. Hegemonic masculine ideals such as men as breadwinners serve to further legitimize problematic behaviors and practices, including men always needing to teach women "lessons" in the event that women transgress normative gender boundaries. Men's adherence to hegemonic masculine ideologies offer us a useful opportunity to understand and theorize how men continue to remain unaccountable for their own behaviors toward women. Men do this by subscribing to a "victim-blaming" discourse that, to a large extent, appears to be socially sanctioned and normalized. This discourse of men always blaming and questioning the behavior of women while simultaneously trivializing and rationalizing their own behavior contributes to maintaining a form of hegemonic masculinity. We would argue that men's vested interest in specific forms of hegemonic masculinity as articulated throughout the discussion is not only problematic for women: men are also affected. Arguably, hegemonic masculinity that encourages men to avoid "soft" activities and always needing to control their territory denies men and their families love, joy, happiness, and peace, as highlighted by the commentary of some participants.

Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity also serves to oppress men who would otherwise wish to express their "feminine" side in the marriage by performing roles normatively assigned to women. Traditionally hegemonic masculine ideals significantly obfuscate, rather than support, men's involvement in activities that are largely perceived to be feminine. Men's inability to meaningfully contest hegemonic masculine ideals is complicated in large part due to wide-ranging perceptions that men always need to prove their masculinity by being heteronormative breadwinners. As revealed in this article, men "do" gender by prioritizing their breadwinning roles while simultaneously resisting and denouncing "feminine" activities such as performing domestic duties. Consequently, men who are unable to meet this cultural obligation of "doing gender" appropriately are strongly repudiated as less masculine. The family space becomes an important terrain for performing gender in ways that are congruent with larger cultural prescriptions and expectations about the "appropriateness" of certain chores and spaces for men and women. Consistent with the work of Liz Walker, Anne K. Mager, Akosua Adomako Ampofo and John Boateng, and Isaac Dery, our findings revealed the existence of multiple and contradictory masculinities located in relation to class, education, age hierarchies, and socioeconomic status of men (Walker 2005; Mager 2010; Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2011; Dery 2019b). Individual men were more likely to embrace more than one ideal of culturally appropriate masculine behavior. The existence of multiple masculinities combined with one or more of these social categories offer men differential access to masculine authority and power over women and other men.

Yet it is also true that not all men take keen interest in abiding by rigid ways of "doing gender." In fact, some of the narratives examined here suggest that some men are likely to start thinking of how to "undo gender" by attempting to usurp feminine spaces in their deeds. Our findings have revealed that, even though hegemonic

masculine ideals such as heteronormative masculinity are prevalent, considerable flexibility surrounds the construction of masculinities among some men. Part of this flexibility is the ability of some men to embody and enact caring masculinity (Elliott 2016). When men engage in traditionally feminized domains such as domestic chores, such men could be argued to be “undoing gender” to some extent (Butler 2004; West and Zimmerman 2009). Men’s interest in deconstructing gendered structures and prescriptions suggests that some men are beginning to hold themselves accountable to rigid gender norms in their families. Masculinizing domestic chores appears to be most salient for men who are gainfully employed, educated, and have had some exposure to feminist values through the activities of an NGO compared to those who are unemployed and uneducated. This is to be expected since the former group of men are educated and employed and do not feel that their masculinity as “breadwinners” are threatened when they take on activities that have been historically assigned to women. Although men within this cohort do not describe themselves as “feminists,” their narratives substantiate and support the liberal feminist idea that men and women are basically equal, hence they should be given equal opportunities and treatment in society.

Although our arguments have deepened existing debates on masculinities, some of our findings are not entirely new when one considers the demographics of men in the study. Men whose narratives support feminist discourses on gender equity are relatively young and have gained considerable class privilege through education and employment. Most of these men are able to enact and enjoy greater gender flexibility in part because they are relatively privileged in society. Our findings also support Tristan Bridges and Cheri J. Pascoe’s theorization on hybrid constructions of masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Some men in this study constructed hybrid masculinities where traditionally hegemonic ideals of masculinity, such as men as independent breadwinners, and contemporary, gender-conscious ideals, such as men as supportive partners, interacted in complex ways. Yet the hybridization of masculinity both challenges and reinforces patriarchal gender arrangements in subtle ways. By maintaining keen interest in their breadwinning model of “being a man,” most men, especially the educated and gainfully employed ones, are critical of patriarchal beliefs that may be destructive to feminist discourses, yet their representations of masculinity indirectly embolden male hegemony in intimate relationships. This brings to the fore evidence of considerable ambiguity in how men define themselves in ways that seek to endorse gender egalitarianism; yet none visibly challenged why women cannot also be breadwinners.

Overall, this article contributes to knowledge on critical men’s studies by highlighting culturally grounded understandings of male practices of masculinity that are likely to frustrate feminist struggles to deconstruct and transform patriarchal masculinities. Our findings also contribute to deepening feminist scholarship on the importance of approaching and studying men and masculine subjectivities as significant social issues. Situating our analysis within the broader constraining context in which participants live, our findings reveal the role of traditionally hegemonic masculine ideologies in perpetuating and reaffirming normative gender constructions in complex ways.

Findings from this article have contributed to deepening knowledge on men and masculinities in northwestern Ghana and beyond, but there is still considerable potential to learn from the range of behaviors, practices, and subjectivities of men in Ghana. In this article, socioeconomic status, prior exposure to the activities of NGOs, and education have been spotlighted as potentially important considerations in how different categories of men are likely to construct and negotiate their masculinity in relation



to femininity. Since this study focused mainly on a small sample of marginalized men, predominantly subsistence farmers from rural communities, our analysis could be narrow. As a result of this potential limitation, we propose that future research consider including the female partners of these men, young men and women, men and women of different professional backgrounds, and men from urban areas.

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