Journal of Gender Studies

ISSN: 0958-9236 (Print) 1465-3869 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjgs20

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To cite this article: Richard Gater (10 Feb 2026): Interrogating positive, healthy and progressive masculinities: conceptual frameworks and their limits for marginalized men, Journal of Gender Studies, DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2026.2629861

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2026.2629861

Published online: 10 Feb 2026.

JOURNAL OF GENDER STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2026.2629861

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Interrogating positive, healthy and progressive masculinities: conceptual frameworks and their limits for marginalized men

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ABSTRACT

The UK Government's pledge to develop men's health strategy, alongside the reception of the Netflix drama *Adolescence*, has reignited debates about a perceived 'crisis of masculinity' and concerns over men's health, educational underachievement, and regressive or toxic masculine behaviours, particularly among marginalized and/or working-class men. In response, the idea of encouraging positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities has been promoted as solutions. The transferability of these concepts to marginalized and/or working-class men remains underexplored. Drawing on a narrative review, this article addresses this gap by critically examining literature and empirical studies on these forms of masculinity, analysing their theoretical foundations and practical implications through the lens of critical studies on men and masculinities. The analysis identifies recurring themes, including emphasis on agency, school-based interventions, absence of unified definitions, and deficit-laden portrayals, while highlighting the significance of intersectionality and place in shaping masculine practices among marginalized and/or working-class men. It also reports research documenting softer displays of manhood among this subgroup. The article argues for consideration of context-sensitive interventions that challenge regressive gender norms and underscores their potential to reduce social and economic imbalances. Finally, it calls for longitudinal research to advance understanding of how masculine identities evolve among marginalized men.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 December 2025
Accepted 6 February 2026

KEYWORDS
Healthy masculinity; intersectionality; marginalized men; positive masculinity; progressive masculinity

Introduction

The recent pledge by the UK Government to develop men's health strategy and cultural portrayals such as the Netflix drama *Adolescence* have sparked renewed media debate about a perceived crisis of masculinity (Donnelly, 2024; Ging & Baker, 2025). Discourse on this crisis often centres on broader economic and social shifts, and the suggestion that conventional male roles have become diminished, leaving many men uncertain about their masculine identities and producing detrimental outcomes (Morgan, 2006). These narratives are cyclical, have historically emerged during periods of rapid transformation, and have been subject to critique (Beynon, 2002). Mimicking

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but amplifying a more than decade-old discourse (see Roberts, 2014), current discussion focuses on the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, marked by the decline of male-dominated heavy industry and manufacturing jobs, the rise of female-associated service-sector employment, and changes in the gender division of labour.

The perceived crisis is often framed as particularly affecting marginalized and/or working-class men (Scourfield, 2005; Strangleman, 2024), hereafter referred to as marginalized. This term denotes the socioeconomic deprivation that affects this demographic, diminishes life chances, and increases the risk of long-term social exclusion (Blackman and Rogers, 2017). Marginalized men's expressions of manhood are often linked to manual labour and traits such as stoicism, risk-taking, toughness, and a rejection of traditionally feminine roles (Gater, 2025a). The decline in opportunities to express conventional masculinity has led some observers to link this to advances in gender equality and women's pursuit of parity, prompting a backlash against feminism among some commentators, who argue that men are being marginalized as women attain greater status (Reeves, 2022). Advocates cite statistics in the domains of health, education, and behaviour, e.g. higher male suicide, lower attainment, and more criminal or antisocial behaviour compared to female counterparts (Bridges & Anthony, 2024). However, statistical evidence concerning the 'crisis of masculinity' relies on an interpretive framework that emphasizes certain trends while often neglecting how men or boys themselves perceive or comprehend this issue (Morgan, 2006).

Nonetheless, adverse behaviours among boys and men and educational underachievement raise significant concerns, particularly given links to economic and social disadvantage (Welmond & Gregory, 2021). Such sentiment is the driver of recent public discourse on the crisis of masculinity, including the Centre for Social Justice's (2025) report *Lost Boys: State of the Nation*, which claims contemporary young men are in crisis. While the past century has witnessed considerable advancements in rights and outcomes for women, the report argues that contemporary boys are increasingly being left behind, highlighting poorer outcomes for young men in health, education, and behavioural domains, compared to young women. For education, the report states that, on average, young men achieve half a grade lower than girls at GCSE examinations. However, the report predominantly overlooks the intersection of social class and gender. This is an oversight, considering that numerous sociologists have indicated that social class exerts a greater influence than gender (Roberts, 2018). By failing to address this dimension, the report treats young men as a homogeneous group and masks substantial inequalities within the category.

When examined through an intersectional lens, disparities become striking. For instance, young men from deprived backgrounds are twice as likely to be not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET) as their more affluent counterparts (Baloch et al., 2025). Men residing in the most deprived areas of the UK are predicted to die 9.7 years earlier than those in the least deprived regions (The Health Foundation, 2025). The risk of suicide is up to ten times higher for men in deprived areas compared to those in the highest social class, who live in wealthier neighbourhoods (Samaritans, 2017). Deaths of despair, including alcohol and drug fatalities, are over five times more prevalent among men in the most deprived areas compared to those in the least deprived (Fenney & Raleigh, 2024).

Public debate often interprets such outcomes through the language of 'toxic masculinity', positioning certain masculine behaviours as harmful to both men and those around them (de Boise, 2019; Harrington, 2021). Yet within critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM), this concept remains contentious and insufficiently attentive to the diversity and classed nature of men's lives (Waling, 2019; Zhao & Roberts, 2025). While some use the term to describe rigid or harmful expressions of masculine-coded traits (Pearson, 2023), its broad application risks pathologising marginalized men and obscuring the structural conditions shaping their behaviours. In everyday digital contexts, manfluencers who promote harmful narratives that resonate with this group amplify these risks (Haslop et al., 2024). These limitations underscore the need for alternative conceptual tools to understand and respond to the challenges marginalized men face. One proposed alternative is the promotion of positive, healthy, or progressive masculinities (Mackay, 2025). However, despite growing advocacy, their relevance and applicability to marginalized men remain unclear. To address this gap and enhance understanding of marginalized men and masculinities, this article draws on a narrative review guided by the question: *to what extent can positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities offer solutions to the social and economic challenges faced by marginalized men?* Sources were identified through purposive searching and citation tracking (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014), without predetermined inclusion criteria. This article examines the literature identified by the review, explores conceptual foundations and practical implications through the lens of CSMM, and considers implications for marginalized men.

This article is organized into three sections. First, it reviews the conceptual frameworks, literature and research on positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities, highlighting factors such as agency (Kiselica et al., 2016), school-based programmes (Wilson et al., 2022), the absence of unified definitions (Oliffe et al., 2019), and deficit-laden portrayals (Whitehead, 2021) that complicate adoption among marginalized men. Second, it problematizes these shortcomings by drawing on CSMM-related theory and research on marginalized men, emphasizing the significance of intersectionality and place in shaping masculine behaviours, and identifying emerging research signalling shifts in manhood among this subgroup (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gater, 2025b; Roberts, 2018; Ward et al., 2017). Finally, it synthesizes the analysis, considering strategies for addressing masculine-related challenges among marginalized men, exploring degendering (Pease, 2025), macro-level interventions, and micro-level approaches, and concluding with a call for context-sensitive interventions co-designed with local stakeholders and grounded in structural awareness (Flood et al., 2024), alongside the need for longitudinal research to better understand why softer masculinities are developing among marginalized men.

Key themes and analysis

Positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities are terms often used interchangeably in public discourse and practice, where they typically refer to beliefs and behaviours intended to help boys and men resist or counter harmful notions of manhood and toxic masculinity (Gardiner, 2024). However, treating these concepts as equivalent overlooks their distinct theoretical foundations, the ways they are defined and assessed within research, and the specific attributes each framework emphasizes. This section analyses

these approaches and identifies their key underpinning ideas and themes, drawing on relevant studies and literature and highlights the limitations that have prompted calls for greater attention to social class (Waling, 2019).

Positive masculinity

Informed mainly by the positive psychology paradigm, the concept of positive masculinity represents a shift away from deficit-based perspectives that focus solely on problems in male behaviour and masculinity (Cole & Patterson, 2022). Instead, it adopts a strength-based approach that emphasizes aspects of traditional masculinity deemed valuable (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010). Kiselica et al. (2016, p. 126) argue that 'a deficit perspective on boys, men, and masculinity limits the ability of psychologists to see and appreciate this form of transgenerational positive masculinity and the full range of the lives of boys and men'. Emphasizing the importance of strengthening positive attributes rather than merely addressing shortcomings, Kiselica et al. (2016), in outlining their conceptualization, identify eleven potential areas of positive masculinity: male relational styles; male ways of caring; generative fatherhood; male self-reliance; the worker-provider tradition; men's respect for women; group orientation; male courage, daring, and risk-taking; male forms of service; men's use of humour; and male heroism.

A strength-based approach is a valuable addition to masculinities studies, especially concerning marginalized men, who are frequently associated with toxic masculinity (Davidson et al., 2025). However, certain aspects of the psychology-informed concept of positive masculinity warrant further critical examination concerning this subgroup. Although some aspects of traditional masculinity embedded within the positive masculinity framework may be viewed as beneficial, they may lead to problematic outcomes if applied rigidly (O'Neill, 2015). Adherence to the worker-provider tradition, which emphasizes men's responsibility to earn income and support their families (Kiselica et al., 2016), may negatively impact marginalized men who are disproportionately affected by unemployment (Baloch et al., 2025). Over time, difficulties in meeting these expectations could result in role strain (Pleck, 1995) and psychological and social consequences as they try to conform to positive masculinity standards.

The oversight regarding marginalized men may stem from existing evidence on positive masculinity, which, while noting some focus on marginalized individuals, primarily emphasizes the experiences of university-educated or socioeconomically privileged men (see, for example, Cole et al., 2019; Estrada & Arciniega, 2015; Hammer & Good, 2010; O'Gorman et al., 2025; Roberts-Douglass & Curtis-Boles, 2013; Wong et al., 2016). This emphasis overlooks the specific challenges faced by marginalized men and aligns with calls for greater attention to intersectionality (Waling, 2019). Moreover, positive masculinity is infused with therapeutic discourse that reinforces neoliberal narratives, emphasizing the autonomous self and personal responsibility for transforming masculine practices through individual determination (Pease, 2025). For example, Kiselica et al. (2016, p. 127) state that positive masculinity depends 'on [men's] … ability to adapt one's sense of masculinity and enact masculine norms in accordance with what is beneficial for self and others in any given setting'. Although individual agency contributes to masculine expression (Waling, 2019), this focus on personal transformation may obscure structural inequalities that shape marginalized men's construction and display of masculinity, as

highlighted in CSMM studies (Connell, 2005) and discussed in the subsequent section. This individualized framing risks overlooking the need for systemic change (Harrington, 2022) and may reinforce the problematic idea that progressive shifts in masculinity are driven by individuals in privileged positions (Roberts & Elliott, 2020).

Lomas (2013, pp. 183–184) offers a revised framework of positive masculinity through the concept of critical positive masculinity, which 'does not involve re-affirming the value of traditional qualities, but showing how men might resist these, or at least re-interpret these in skilful ways, [while not losing] sight of the idea that masculinity can still be problematic'. This concept draws on empirical evidence, including a qualitative study of thirty socioeconomically advantaged male meditators (Lomas et al., 2016). The study explored meditation practice and its potential implications for well-being. Findings demonstrated the adoption of certain positive masculine norms that encouraged emotional openness. However, participants faced challenges in practising these behaviours outside the meditation group due to social networks that reinforced traditional masculine norms. Although these findings relate to advantaged men and cannot be assumed to reflect the experiences of other groups, they nevertheless illustrate how wider normative expectations can constrain attempts to practice alternative masculinities. This point becomes particularly relevant when considering marginalized men, as Connell (2005) notes that disadvantaged communities have often been sites where specific hypermasculine repertoires are reinforced. In such settings, embracing a 'hard man' identity may continue to serve as a means of attaining respect and recognition (Davidson et al., 2025).

Incorporating intersectionality into the concept of positive masculinity, Wilson et al. (2022) propose a refined definition as a foundation for developing psychosocial programmes for young men, with particular emphasis on school-based interventions. While the inclusion of intersectionality is a valuable addition to the positive masculinity framework, especially for marginalized young men whose masculine identities are shaped by socioeconomic disadvantage (Connell, 2005), the specific focus on school-based programmes merits critical examination. Wilson et al. (2022, p. 3) state that 'implementation of . . . programmes via schools are fitting, as schools themselves are a site for the production, negotiation and regulation of certain male-coded behaviours'. However, this emphasis overlooks evidence within CSMM studies that consistently recognizes the disaffection of marginalized young men towards formal education and their complex, often strained relationships with authority figures and teachers (Connell, 2005; Gater, 2025b; Mac an; Ghaill, 1994; Nayak, 2003; Willis, 1977). Consequently, it may be necessary to consider alternative approaches to promoting positive masculinity that extend beyond the school environment for this subgroup.

Expanding beyond the school setting, the Imagine a Man project explored perceptions of masculinity within a youth work context in Scotland through a two-stage research process (YouthLink Scotland, 2024). Stage one involved an online survey inviting participants to share their views on gender stereotypes and found evidence of traditional masculine norms, such as risk-taking. Stage two involved six focus groups conducted across three deprived regions to examine expectations and perceptions of positive masculinity. Responses indicated that young men valued traits historically associated with femininity, such as being caring, which led to suggestions that they were moving 'towards amalgamated masculinities . . . where traditional masculine traits coexist with

roles involving self-care and care for others' (Davidson et al., 2025, p. 8). However, respondents demonstrated little awareness of the concept of positive masculinity, and no clear consensus emerged regarding what constituted it. Definitions tended to reflect the young people's own cultural and socioeconomic circumstances. This ambiguity may stem from the absence of a clear, unified definition, which could hinder its promotion and align with broader calls for more precise descriptions of what this form of manhood entails (Oliffe et al., 2019).

Healthy masculinity

Healthy masculinities differ somewhat from positive masculinity, which focuses on retaining aspects of traditional masculinity considered valuable (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010), and instead emphasize traits historically associated with women and femininity, such as compassion, emotional expression and vulnerability (Waling, 2019). Theoretical definitions of healthy masculinities include men's capacity to articulate emotion, demonstrate empathy, acknowledge fear, express kindness and respect for girls and women, and maintain a conscious awareness of their own masculinity and its impact on others (Roberts et al., 2019). Contemporary discussions of the problematic social media content producer Andrew Tate and 'toxic masculinity' have often turned to notions of healthy masculinities as a solution, stressing the importance of promoting alternative conceptualizations of manhood that encourage emotional well-being and challenge regressive gender norms (Verma & Khurana, 2023).

Evaluation of healthy masculinities-related studies includes Roberts et al'.s (2019) scoping review of eighty-one pieces of relevant literature. The review sought to assess global evidence and the broader research on the influence of masculinity(ies) in advancing gender equality, while also identifying effective practices for gender-transformative programmes that foster healthier masculinities. Findings included a lack of robust, long-term evaluation data on programme outcomes and the need for more rigorous, longitudinal assessments. Recommendations emphasized engaging diverse stakeholders, delivering programmes across multiple sites and settings, and adopting place-based approaches that consider how locations and environments can support or hinder the expression of healthier masculinities. The review also noted that interventions effective in one setting may not be applicable in another.

Flood et al'.s (2024) critical review of fifteen community-based programmes for boys and young men in Australia provides further evaluation of healthy masculinities. These programmes were assessed against established standards for gender-transformative work, with eligibility requiring both an explicit focus on masculinities and a clear aim to improve the lives of boys or men. The review found that, while healthy masculinity was a common reference point, programmes varied in the qualities they associated with it. Only a small number adopted a whole-of-institution approach, and implementation was often constrained by location and the challenge of securing long-term funding, resulting in short-term operations. An intersectional perspective was largely absent, with many programmes failing to collaborate with communities or acknowledge intersecting forms of disadvantage. Notably, none of the programmes included a formal evaluation of their impact on relevant attitudes or behaviours.

Both reviews underscore the importance of culturally sensitive, locally responsive programmes that recognize intersectionality and the influence of place and environment in shaping concepts of manhood and the adoption of healthy masculinities. This emphasis is reinforced in Griffith's (2022) commentary on *A Relational-Cultural Framework for Promoting Healthy Masculinities*, which stresses that boys and young men develop their ideas of manhood not in isolation but within the context of relationships and communities. Consequently, interventions that focus solely on the individual are often ineffective, as relational pressures, such as those from peer groups, can reinforce traditional masculine norms and remain sources of stigma or invalidation.

The omission of intersectionality in healthy masculinities programmes is particularly significant for marginalized men. As subsequent sections will demonstrate, CSMM-related research positions intersectionality as central to understanding how these men construct masculine identity and how place-based influences shape this process (Connell, 2005; Ward et al., 2017). Such influences include gender policing techniques such as peer pressure to conform to traditional masculine norms and ridicule directed at alternative expressions of manhood. Walkerdine & Jimenez's (2012) study in a deprived former coal-mining community in the South Wales Valleys offers a salient example. They describe a young man employed as a pizza delivery driver, a form of work often associated with softer and healthier masculinities and traits historically coded as feminine (Roberts, 2018). Ridicule from family members regarding both the nature of the work and the uniform led to feelings of shame and ultimately to the young man's resignation. This example illustrates how relational and place-based pressures can undermine engagement with non-traditional masculine practices in specific contexts.

Progressive masculinity

Ideas and studies concerning progressive masculinity are less extensively documented than those addressing positive and healthy masculinities. Nevertheless, Whitehead's (2021) book entitled *'Toxic Masculinity: Curing the Virus – Making Men Smarter, Healthier, Safer'* offers a significant discussion of this form of masculinity. Framing his analysis against the backdrop of toxic masculinity, Whitehead underscores its detrimental consequences for men, women, and society and conceptually positions progressive masculinity as a solution. Similar to the concept of healthy masculinities, Whitehead identifies practices traditionally associated with women and femininity, such as empathy and emotional intelligence, together with qualities including sincerity, understanding, self-awareness, and reflexivity, as key markers of progressive masculinity. He argues that these qualities, especially empathy and emotional intelligence, promote mental well-being, reduce the risk of depression, homophobia, and sexism, and foster positive self-esteem.

Unlike the identified limitations attributed to positive and healthy masculinities, Whitehead (2021, p. 57) contends that, in theory, all men can cultivate progressive masculinity. However, he cautions that this 'cannot be achieved independent of other factors, such as poverty, education, culture, corruption, drugs, crime, racism and a deteriorating environment', thereby implicitly acknowledging the role of intersectionality in shaping masculine transformation.

Nevertheless, his subsequent analysis appears somewhat contradictory, aligning with deficit-laden accounts that depict marginalized men with limited education as regressive,

while positioning educated men as the principal bearers of progressive masculinity. For example, he writes:

> I am confident one will find a majority of progressive men in certain professions and certain locations. For example, from my experience they are the majority in education, both state and private, and are to be found in universities, colleges and similar organisations worldwide (Whitehead, 2021, p. 76).

Such framing overlooks evidence of progressive shifts in masculinity among educationally disaffected and marginalized young men, where key relational traits such as empathy and emotional intelligence have been observed (Gater, 2025b). It further, even if unintentionally, reinforces static conceptions of masculinity within this subgroup, further portraying them as more regressive than their privileged and educated counterparts (Roberts & Elliott, 2020). This narrative is problematic because it implies that men with lower levels of education have limited capacity to transform their gender identities or adopt softer expressions of manhood, thereby diminishing perceptions of these outcomes as attainable for this group.

This section has critically examined the core components and relevant literature on positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities, identifying key limitations regarding the applicability of such concepts to marginalized men, particularly the insufficient attention to intersectionality. The following section extends this critique by exploring how the masculine identities of marginalized men are theorized within CSMM and by analysing the role of place-based factors in shaping variations in these identities.

Marginalized masculinities and place

While literature and studies on positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities are largely limited in their engagement with intersectionality, critical studies on men and masculinities often apply a multiple masculinities framework, which recognizes that race, class, sexuality, and age shape masculine identities (Connell, 2005). This framework incorporates a hierarchical structure, with hegemonic masculinity occupying the highest position as the culturally dominant form at any given time and legitimizing male dominance (Connell, 2005). Other masculinities within this structure include complicit masculinity, in which most men are situated; subordinated masculinity, often attributed to gay men; and marginalized masculinity, referring to men who are powerful in terms of gender but disadvantaged by race, social class, or ethnicity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This weakened position of power is considered to give rise to 'protest masculinity' among marginalized men, which denotes a defiant response to social exclusion and limited access to dominant forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Gender practices historically associated (though not exclusively, see Gater, 2025b) with protest masculinity include resistance to schooling and authority, attraction to manual labour, substance use, homophobia, and sexism, all understood as a reworking of hegemonic masculinity within the context of poverty (Connell, 2005). These features of protest masculinity have frequently been documented in studies on marginalized men. Examples include Mac an Ghaill's (1994) ethnographic study in a secondary school, which identified a group of working-class young men, termed the 'Macho Lads', who rejected education, expressed strong homophobic

attitudes, and displayed overt sexism. Similarly, Nayak's (2003) research in Northeast England identified a group of working-class young men, termed the 'Real Geordies', who dismissed the relevance of formal education and engaged in fighting, drinking, and sexist discussions of sexual conquest. Ward's (2015) study in the South Wales Valleys identified a group of working-class young men known as the 'Valley Boiz', who displayed anti-school behaviours and expressed homophobic and misogynistic views.

Taken together, CSMM-informed studies focusing on marginalized men illustrate how social class and gender intersect to shape distinct expressions of masculine identity, underscoring the need to consider these intersecting factors in analyses of this demographic. The construction of marginalized masculinities must also account for the significance of place, as 'local expectations of what it means to be a man are key to understanding the performances of young men's masculinities' (Ward et al., 2017, p. 799). The relationship between local expectations and masculine identity is evident in research on deprived former industrial heartland communities, where Walkerdine and Jiménez (2012) argue that, because of the historical significance of masculinity in enduring the harsh conditions of heavy industrial work, these embodiments are passed down through generations. Furthermore, Ward et al. (2017) contend that in communities shaped by industrial decline and ongoing deprivation, socially acceptable forms of working-class masculinities are often expressed through associated toxic masculine behaviours.

Deviating from this portrayal, Roberts (2018) offers an alternative contemporary perspective on working-class young men and masculinity. Conducted in Kent, UK, an area historically associated with industrial work that has undergone notable regeneration and an increase in retail employment, Roberts' research examined the educational and employment trajectories and the constructions of masculinity among a group of working-class young men. Rather than focusing on the most marginalized segments of the working class, the study centred on what Roberts (2018) refers to as the 'missing middle': those young men who are neither disengaged from education or employment nor on a conventional path towards middle-class adulthood.

The findings from Roberts' study highlighted softer expressions of masculinity that supported young men's participation in job roles traditionally associated with feminine qualities and skills, particularly within the service sector. The young men no longer strictly conformed to traditional standards of protest masculinity and demonstrated greater inclusivity towards gay men, emotional openness, and willingness to admit vulnerability. However, these shifts were accompanied by the continued use of some contradictory sexist and homophobic language. Roberts (2018, p. 121) argues that these softer displays of masculinity and progressive ideas of manhood may be attributed to the contemporary context of his study, suggesting that the young working-class men 'are not hostage to the traditional predisposition held by their counterparts from previous generations'.

Gater's (2025b) qualitative ethnographic study of the school-to-work transition and masculine behaviour among a group of working-class young men, referred to as the 'Ladz', based in a deprived former coalfield community in the South Wales Valleys, UK, which had experienced minimal regeneration, offers both comparable and divergent findings to those of Roberts (2018). Gater returned the focus to the most marginalized segment of working-class youth, who are consistently associated

with disaffection towards education, an attraction to manual labour, and expressions of protest masculinity (Connell, 2005). In line with this portrayal, Gater's findings document continuities including the Ladz' partial engagement in anti-school behaviour, criminality, use of drugs and alcohol, a rejection of certain service sector roles due to difficulties in performing emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), and a preference for manual employment shaped by familial socialization and the influence of prominent male figures.

Yet, like with Roberts (2018), changes in masculine behaviour were also observed, including physical tactility, sensitivity, empathy, gender-egalitarian views, and the rejection of homophobia. These behaviours are incongruent with historical findings concerning this subgroup of working-class young men and somewhat deviate (see, for example, Howson, 2006) from dominant conceptualizations of protest masculinity (Connell, 2005). Gater (2025b) explains changes in behaviour as a result of rupturing processes, or significant social and cultural influences that destabilize working-class masculine modes of being. Continuities in behaviour, however, are attributed to stagnant social and economic development at the research location, leading to the ongoing transmission of a place-based protest masculine dispositions. Gater (2024, p. 212) conceptualizes the combination of gender practices as 'amalgamated masculinities', a fusion of locally constructed protest masculine characteristics and softer masculine attributes adopted through external cultural influence'.

A comparative analysis of Roberts and Gater's contemporary research on marginalized young men offers some cause for optimism. Both studies identify, to varying degrees, a complex middle-ground masculine position characterized by a combination of progressive developments and enduring traditional practices. The analysis also reaffirms the importance of intersectionality and highlights the significant role of social class in shaping ideas of manhood (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, the significance of place in shaping localized expectations of masculinity (Ward et al., 2017) is shown to operate not only across social classes but also within them, underscoring the nuanced and context-dependent nature of masculine identity formation. For example, the social transformation and labour market restructuring in Roberts' study location contributed to softer expressions of masculinity that facilitated young men's participation in service-sector employment. Gater's unregenerated research site contributed to the rejection of some service-sector work and to the continuation of traditional masculine dispositions oriented towards manual employment.

This section highlights the importance of intersectionality in understanding how masculine identity is constructed among marginalized men. As demonstrated throughout this article, this dimension has often been overlooked in discussions of positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities. It also underscores the significance of place in shaping expectations of masculinity, showing how these expectations operate not only across social classes but also within them. Rather than relying on deficit-based accounts of marginalized men, this section points to contemporary, emerging shifts in ideas of manhood that may offer pathways for addressing the social and economic challenges faced by this subgroup. However, how such pathways are created, or whether efforts should instead focus on dismantling gendered norms, requires further discussion. Drawing together the analysis presented throughout this article, the following discussion section explores these issues.

Discussion and conclusion

Embedded within discourses of and engaging with 'masculinity in crisis' and 'toxic masculinity', this article has critically examined literature and empirical research on positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities as potential responses to challenges faced by marginalized men. Drawing on CSMM, it shows how emphasis on factors such as agency (Kiselica et al., 2016), school-based programmes (Wilson et al., 2022), the absence of unified definitions (Oliffe et al., 2019), and deficit-laden portrayals (Whitehead, 2021) can obscure or not sufficiently account for structural inequality, intersectionality, and place-based influences. The significance of these factors is further illustrated through emerging evidence of softer expressions of masculinity among marginalized young men (Gater, 2025b; Roberts, 2018).

The analysis advances understanding of marginalized men and masculinities by identifying key limitations in framing these masculinities as solutions. However, the review has constraints, including its narrative approach and reliance on secondary sources. The predominance of Western-centric evidence means the findings may not be fully transferable across international settings, as masculinities are understood as shaped by place and cultural context (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Furthermore, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) encompasses axes such as race, migration, disability, and Indigeneity, which may complicate or reshape how these masculinity frameworks operate for different groups of marginalized men. Nonetheless, the analysis raises a critical question: how can we meaningfully address the masculine-related challenges faced by socioeconomically marginalized men?

Degendering, understood as the process of undoing gender, has emerged as a radical approach to challenging harmful gender norms. Pease (2025, p. 100) draws on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of lines of flight to explore degendering and the possibility of 'finding a pathway to break away from prescribed ways of being' and challenging gender binaries. This approach offers an ambitious means to reduce inequality by dismantling gendered expectations and stereotypical behaviours. Deutsch (2007, p. 108) argues that 'the potential of human agency is the most important contribution' of gender deconstruction. Pease (2025, p. 100) also highlights that 'lines of flight are … actions that aim to escape social forces and power that constrain us', emphasizing the importance of agency in resisting normative gender structures. This emphasis on agency becomes problematic when applied to marginalized men, whose expressions of protest masculinity are shaped less by personal choice and more by structural limitations and socioeconomic deprivation (Connell, 2005). Without addressing underlying inequalities, the capacity for marginalized men to 'opt out' of masculinity may remain limited.

This necessitates macro-level interventions and anti-poverty strategies that tackle the root causes of marginalization shaping the expression of protest masculinity among marginalized men (Connell, 2005). Such measures are critical to dismantling the material conditions that sustain negative expressions of manhood. For instance, Gater's (2025b) ethnographic study of the Ladz in a post-industrial South Wales community shows how stagnant economic development sustains traditional negative masculine norms. In contrast, Roberts' (2018) research in a regenerated area of Kent demonstrates how labour market diversification can foster more inclusive masculine identities among working-class

young men. However, while anti-poverty strategies may offer a robust solution, they are also the most politically and economically challenging to implement, and even if achieved, may not disrupt the cultural forces that shape gendered behaviours (DiBianca & Mahalik, 2022).

Given the improbability of macro-level interventions, micro-level strategies may offer a viable alternative. The Imagine a Man project (YouthLink Scotland, 2024) shows how community youth work settings can encourage conversations about masculinity among marginalized young men. Unlike school-based programmes, which may struggle to engage marginalized young men given their historically disaffected relationships with education (Connell, 2005; Willis, 1977), community-based approaches may offer greater potential for lasting impact. Flood et al. (2024) state that masculinities-focused programmes, when developed collaboratively with communities and delivered by trusted local actors, can increase engagement. However, interventions must be long-term and relational, recognizing that masculine identity is not transformed through one-off workshops but through sustained dialogue and support (Roberts et al., 2019).

An additional challenge in promoting alternative masculinities is the lack of a clear, shared understanding (Waling, 2019). Divergent terminology and the broad range of characteristics associated with positive, healthy, and progressive masculinities complicate messaging and interpretation. This task becomes more complex among marginalized men, whose ideas of masculinity are shaped by place and local culture (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, Gater, 2025b; Roberts, 2018; Ward et al., 2017). Findings from the Imagine a Man project underscore this point, showing that definitions of positive masculinity among marginalized young men are closely tied to their cultural and socioeconomic circumstances (YouthLink Scotland, 2024). Despite the complexity and potential cost of addressing the challenges surrounding marginalized men and masculinity, the benefits could be substantial. Effective interventions that challenge protest masculinity could help reduce associated behaviours such as resistance to schooling, preference for manual labour, and substance use (Connell, 2005). In turn, this may lead to improved educational attainment, greater employment opportunities, and reduced health inequalities. These benefits would not only support this subgroup but also deliver broader societal gains.

In closing, the benefits and complexities of addressing the societal challenges faced by marginalized men linked to adherence to regressive gender norms underscore the importance of engaging with research that evidences progressive shifts in this subgroup's masculine behaviours. Recent studies by Roberts (2018) and Gater (2025b) highlight such changes. Although their findings differ in nuance and the extent to which these insights can be generalized beyond their specific socio-cultural contexts remains uncertain, both suggest that the future of masculinity among marginalized men is not fixed in a regressive direction (Roberts & Elliott, 2020). Instead, a middle ground is developing in which traditional and softer masculine traits coexist. This space remains contested and unstable, shaped by enduring structural inequalities, the persistence of traditional masculine norms, heightened cultural scrutiny of men and masculinity, and an increasing emphasis on softer masculine ideals. This middle-ground position may offer a promising avenue for transforming the masculine identities of marginalized men.

However, without meaningful engagement, this space risks being co-opted by manfluencers who promote harmful narratives that resonate with marginalized men (Haslop et al., 2024). Conversely, with support grounded in intersectionality, structural awareness,

and community engagement (Flood et al., 2024), it could become a site of progressive change. Policymakers must move beyond short-term funding cycles and commit to sustained investment to enable context-sensitive, multiagency interventions. Longitudinal research is needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how and why softer masculinities are emerging among marginalized men and to assess the long-term impact of intersectional interventions aimed at fostering alternative masculinities. To ensure meaningful progress, future research should prioritize place-based, participatory approaches that centre on the lived experiences of marginalized men.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Richard Gater:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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