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Pandemic masculinity: urban low-income men and the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria

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Abstract

In studies of violence against women and children during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as in explanations of men's increased vulnerability to the disease, the concept of 'toxic masculinity' regularly surfaces. However, direct research on men's perspectives on the pandemic's impact on them as men remains scarce. Drawing on interview data on urban Nigerian men's lived experiences and narratives of the epidemic in relation to their identities and roles as men, I explore whether toxic masculinity was emblematic of men's responses to the Covid-19 socio-economic crisis. While I found little evidence of the men's reliance on toxic masculine practices to maintain their identities as men during the pandemic, their accounts revealed something quite significant: the reconstitution of masculine success in terms of the ability to adjust to the times by discontinuing practices that, while once essential to their identity as men, now threatened their image as capable providers. These adjustments, which frequently involved resorting to practices that would be considered unmanly, were constituted as part of the routine situational pivots that 'real' men must make, in keeping with their role as all-weather providers. I conclude with a reflection on how so-called non-heteronormative male performances might still mask gender inequalities and perpetuate certain aspects of patriarchal power.

Résumé

Dans les études sur la violence envers les femmes et les enfants pendant la pandémie de Covid-19, ainsi que dans les explications de la vulnérabilité accrue des hommes à cette maladie, le concept de « masculinité toxique » fait régulièrement surface. Cependant, les études directes sur les perspectives des hommes sur l'impact de la pandémie sur eux en tant qu'hommes restent rares. En s'appuyant sur des données d'entretiens sur les expériences vécues, et sur les récits de Nigérians urbains sur l'épidémie concernant leur identité et leur rôle en tant qu'hommes, l'auteur pose la question de savoir si la masculinité toxique était emblématique des réponses des hommes à la crise socioéconomique de la Covid-19. Bien que rien ou peu ne permette de prouver que ces hommes ont eu recours à des pratiques masculines toxiques pour maintenir leur identité en tant qu'hommes pendant la pandémie, leurs récits ont révélé quelque chose d'assez significatif : la reconstitution du succès masculin en termes de capacité à s'adapter à l'époque en abandonnant des pratiques qui, bien qu'autrefois essentielles à leur identité en tant qu'hommes, menaçaient désormais leur image de soutien de famille capable. Ces ajustements, qui impliquent souvent le recours à des

pratiques considérées comme peu viriles, s'inscrivent dans les revirements situationnels habituels que les « vrais » hommes doivent opérer, en adéquation avec leur rôle de soutien de famille en toutes circonstances. L'auteur conclut par une réflexion sur la manière dont les comportements masculins dits non hétéronormatifs peuvent encore masquer les inégalités de genre et perpétuer certains aspects du patriarcat.

Resumo

Em estudos sobre a violência contra mulheres e crianças durante a pandemia de Covid-19, bem como em explicações sobre a maior vulnerabilidade dos homens à doença, o conceito de 'masculinidade tóxica' surge regularmente. No entanto, a investigação direta sobre as perspectivas dos homens relativamente ao impacto da pandemia sobre eles enquanto homens continua a ser escassa. Com base em dados de entrevistas sobre as experiências vividas por homens urbanos nigerianos e narrativas da epidemia em relação às suas identidades e papéis como homens, exploro se a masculinidade tóxica foi emblemática das respostas dos homens à crise socioeconómica da Covid-19. Embora tenha encontrado poucas evidências de que os homens tenham recorrido a práticas masculinas tóxicas para manterem as suas identidades como homens durante a pandemia, os seus relatos revelaram algo bastante significativo: a reconstituição do sucesso masculino em termos da capacidade de se ajustarem aos tempos, descontinuando práticas que, embora outrora essenciais para a sua identidade como homens, ameaçavam agora a sua imagem como provedores capazes. Estes ajustamentos, que frequentemente envolviam o recurso a práticas que seriam consideradas pouco masculinas, foram constituídos como parte da rotina de mudanças situacionais que os 'verdadeiros' homens têm de fazer, de acordo com o seu papel de provedores de tudo. Concluo com uma reflexão sobre a forma como os chamados desempenhos masculinos não heteronormativos podem ainda mascarar desigualdades de género e perpetuar certos aspectos do patriarcado.

Introduction

Social science research on men in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic has largely been informed by the lens of 'toxic masculinity'. Generally, typical accounts of men's heightened vulnerability to Covid-19 illness and death stress their elevated participation in certain, often risky, practices and behaviours, such as excessive smoking and drinking, delays in treatment seeking, sense of invulnerability, poor self-care, and reckless attitude to and defiance of Covid-19-related health recommendations (Capraro and Barcelo 2020; Cassino 2020; Glick 2020; Howard 2021; Mahalik et al. 2022a; 2022b; Ng 2020; Palmer and Peterson 2020; Wojnicka 2022).

A second social science research strand has focused on how preventive measures implemented during the pandemic deeply bruised men's sense of their manliness, reduced their capacity to perform key gender roles, created a sense of masculine deficiency among them, and resulted in gender relations and practices that reproduced and intensified gender inequalities, including sexual and gender-based violence. For instance, Ruxton and Burrell (2020) and Mathathu et al. (2024) assert that socially driven expectations for and among men to be unrelenting 'providers' and 'breadwinners' made the economic crisis caused by the pandemic particularly severe for them and translated into violent practices towards those who were around them,

particularly women and children. According to the UN (UN Women 2020), among several men, the uncertainties and frustrations of the period were expressed through anger and violence towards wives and children. Frustrated, hopeless and isolated with their wives and girlfriends, men externalized their turmoil and rage on the women in their lives. There are also studies on the impact of hypermasculine political leadership traits on responses to the pandemic (Johnson and Williams 2020; Waylen 2021), with one concluding that 'the reluctance of hypermasculine leaders to take the pandemic seriously and implement or adhere to mitigation measures contributed to incoherent policymaking, poor and confused communication, reducing levels of public trust, and contributing to high rates of infection and death' (Waylen 2021).

Neglected in these studies, however, has been the question of whether toxic masculinity was emblematic of men's responses to the Covid-19 socio-economic crisis, or, more generally, whether men undergoing incapacitating socio-economic situations respond monolithically, following a similar violent, toxic path to affirm their masculinity. This article draws on my recent research in a low-income urban settlement in Nigeria to examine men's lived experiences and accounts of the pandemic in relation to their notions and performances of their masculine identities and roles as men. Building on the often neglected evidence that masculinities are situational or unfixed enactments that vary among men (Connell 2005), I suggest the consideration and analysis of Covid-19 pandemic masculinities in ways that pay attention to the dynamism in and multiplicity of ways in which men experiencing socio-economic crisis and adversity engage with the norms of masculinity.

Literature

In the existing research on men's response to the anxieties and uncertainties caused by Covid-19, a monolithic view dominates: namely, that the economic catastrophes caused by the pandemic damaged men's feelings of self-importance and economic self-sufficiency, usually performed by working and providing for the household. Ruxton and Burrell (2020) note that the pandemic increased opportunities and motivations for men to exert power and control over women and children, as they (men) sought to compensate for their feelings of masculine insufficiency. Similarly, scholars have suggested that the experience of joblessness and reduced economic prospects or threats of it during the pandemic triggered men to invest in other forms of dominance and male power models, including violence at home (Faisal *et al.* 2022; Mathathu *et al.* 2024; Mehta *et al.* 2020; Mishra 2020; Nigam 2020; Sattar *et al.* 2024). Complementing these claims were findings that, during the pandemic, men's consumption of alcohol at home rose as they sought to cope with economic frustrations and feelings of not living up to society's manhood ideals, often with harmful consequences in terms of violence to themselves and to those around them (Carbia *et al.* 2022; Finlay and Gilmore 2020; Oldham *et al.* 2021; White 2020).

Echoing the link between Covid-19 and the intensification of violence in intimate spaces, Wafula (2020) opines that the pandemic torpedoed income pathways for men amid social expectations that still place the responsibility for provisioning and family sustenance on them. He purports that the reported increases in violence against female partners by men during the lockdown was a compensatory manifestation of a masculinity deprived of public performance opportunities. In Brazil, Santos *et al.*

(2021) affirm the 'toxic masculinity' buzzword, arguing that the pandemic increased domestic violence due to men's feelings of loss of power and their attempt to stabilize or reconfigure their masculinity based on norms centred around patriarchal power and being in control. Medrado *et al.* (2021) also suggest that Covid-19 dealt a lethal blow to traditional constructions of masculinity in terms of work and economic power. It aggravated men's anxiety regarding their own safety and triggered job insecurity, financial stress and uncertainty, which jeopardized men's 'place' as 'family providers', intensifying their use of violence to renegotiate power in the domestic space and outside it. This perspective resonates in Usta, Murr and El-Jarrah (2021), who assert that, during the pandemic, men's violence against women and children increased in Lebanon due largely to worsening economic stress related to achieving masculine gender norms. Further, in Zimbabwe, Mathathu *et al.* (2024) contend that farm losses caused by floods during Covid-19 heightened rural male farmers' feelings of masculine insecurity, resulting in their use of violence against their wives when they asked for money for family expenses.

While the 'toxic masculinity' model of men and Covid-19 has its usefulness, it forecloses deeper understanding and appreciation of the multiple ways in which different men responded to the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. If anything stands out from over three decades of critical research on men as a gendered group, it is the multiplicity, fluidity and dynamism of masculinities, and the synchronicity of multiple masculinities in any given context. Ammann and Staudacher (2020) call for research on the 'complexity, fluidity, and intersectionality' of masculinity to counter 'the tendency to deny pluralistic representations of masculinities'. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, some studies have reported expressions of masculinity that weakened traditional gender role differentiations at the household level, boosted cooperation rather than conflict and violence, and improved male participation in domestic work and childcare (Bühler *et al.* 2021; Carlson *et al.* 2022a; 2022b; Karadeniz and Çakmakcı 2021; Zossou 2021). Similarly, Barker *et al.* (2021) and Baral (2021) suggest that the pandemic presented an opportunity for some men to embrace previously unexplored aspects of masculinity.

However, the politics of pandemic masculinities and their links to the goal of being able to reap the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell 2005; 2020) are underexplored in the literature. Berggren (2014) warns that uncritical focus on the plurality of masculinity and on non-heteronormative practices among men can hinder an appreciation of the ongoing influence, resilience and 'stickiness' of certain ideals of manliness. Mark Hunter, in his *Love in the Time of AIDS* (2010), suggested that, changing expressions of masculinity in intimate and gender relations in South Africa notwithstanding, being a respectable man was still very much associated with provider-hood. Mario Schmidt's (2024) study of economically unstable migrant men in Nairobi showed that, while they emphasized other aspects of the cluster of traits defining masculine success, the narrative of a real man as economically secure and capable of providing well for his family and wards still underpinned many of their notions of masculinity.

Drawing on new data from a study among urban low-income men in a Nigerian city, I broaden the understanding of men and Covid-19 beyond the 'toxic masculinity' model. I specifically examine men's lived experiences and accounts of the pandemic in relation to their masculine identities and roles. My engagement with the compound and complex ways in which men as gendered persons engaged with and responded to

the manifold socio-economic disruptions occasioned by the pandemic maps directly onto two related but separate issues in the literature on men and the pandemic: whether toxic masculinity was emblematic of men's responses to the Covid-19 socio-economic crisis; and the extent to which the pandemic provided an opportunity for men to embrace previously unexplored aspects of masculinity.

Context and study setting

Although Nigeria's government assured its people in January 2020 that it had stepped up border surveillance to prevent the spread of Covid-19, just one month later, on 27 February, an Italian national arriving in Lagos tested positive for the virus, becoming the first known case of the illness in Nigeria. Days later, a Nigerian citizen who drove the Italian became the second confirmed case of the virus. As the number of cases grew across the country and mortality surged, the government, on 30 March, declared lockdown, stay-at-home and movement restriction measures that would last several months. As elsewhere, these measures shook the country's economy and value chains, resulting in inflation, major layoffs, loss of livelihoods, reduced earnings, and low sales and profits for people and businesses (Mac-Ikemenjima and Izugbara 2021).

Urban Nigerian settings were among the worst hit by the adverse socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 containment measures. Extensive public frustration with the management of the pandemic in a country of over 200 million people (Worldometer 2024), over half (54 per cent) of whom live in urban areas (UN Population Division 2023), soon resulted in protests and demonstrations across Nigerian cities. Obiezu (2020) writes that, amid unbearable food prices and escalating economic uncertainty and suffering across the country, citizens in several urban settings attacked government warehouses, looting supplies and 'tons of relief materials . . . donated by a private sector coalition against the coronavirus' (see also Mac-Ikemenjima and Izugbara 2021).

My material comes from research conducted among men in the low-income neighbourhoods of Aba between May and December 2021. A historic town in Nigeria's south-east, Aba lies along the west bank of the Aba River, at the intersection of roads from the towns of Port Harcourt, Owerri, Umuahia, Ikot Ekpene and Ikot Abasi (Hoiberg 2010). Before the establishment of a military garrison in Aba in 1901 by the British, the settlement was already a famed precolonial market town for the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria (Munro 1995). Aba is currently a significant industrial and commercial centre in Nigeria, noted for textiles, pharmaceuticals, soap, plastics, footwear, cosmetics, handicrafts, metal work and distilleries (Iroka *et al.* 2021). According to data from the World Population Review (2024), Aba has a population of 1.2 million people, the vast majority of whom are Igbo (Obi 2021).

More than half of the population of Aba lives in under-served slum neighbourhoods (Nduka and Duru 2014). Often referred to as *Azubodo* (the backyard of the city) in local Aba parlance, these neighbourhoods have limited access to contemporary amenities (Godswill *et al.* 2016). Masculinity norms that value provider-hood, heterosexuality and domination over women are prevalent in Aba (Ogbu 2021). Among the Igbo, men are expected to be financially independent by having a source of income, to provide for and support their nuclear and extended families, marry, sire children, and head their families and communities. Although most men in Aba are

traders, vendors, wage labourers, owners of small businesses and artisans, formal employment exists in the town through several government, banking, healthcare, hospitality, educational and manufacturing institutions. According to a 2020 study in Aba, only 10 per cent of men aged twenty-five to sixty-five lacked a regular source of income (Obumneme 2020). In 2014, income per capita in Aba was 3.5 times higher than the Nigerian average (Anyamele 2016).

Study design

For this study, forty-five in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) and six focus group discussion sessions (FGDs) were held with men ranging in age from twenty-seven to sixty-seven in three purposively selected (mostly) inner-city residential neighbour-hoods in Aba. Respondent sampling was multi-staged. First, a sampling frame of households in the three purposively selected neighbourhoods was developed from Nigeria's National Population Commission (NPC) housing list.[1] In the second stage, interval sampling was used on the NPC sampling frame to select twenty-seven households from each neighbourhood (eighty-one in total). Finally, fishbowl sampling was used to randomly select forty-five of the eighty-one households from the neighbourhoods to participate in the IDIs (fifteen in each neighbourhood) and thirty-six households for the FGDs (twelve in each neighbourhood). In fishbowl sampling, each element of the sampling frame is numbered using separate slips of paper and put into a bowl or container and shuffled, and slips are randomly picked out until the target sample size is met (Bailey 2008).

Sampled households were visited to confirm that a male household head was present and willing to participate in the study. Households with no recognizable male head or where the identified male household head was unwilling or unavailable to participate were replaced. In this study, a household was defined as one or more people who live together in a common space and 'eat from the same pot' (Puorideme and Christensen 2022). In each neighbourhood, two FGDs comprising six men were held. All interviews were face to face and conducted in the Igbo language or pidgin English, using semi-structured IDIs and FGD guides that specifically sought the men's experiences during Covid. Consent for both participation and recording of the interviews was obtained from all the respondents. Interviews typically lasted an average of one hour, were all audio-recorded, and were held in environments and spaces free from attention, threat of sanctions or pressure from non-participants. Participants received food items worth 4,000 naira (about US$4) for participation.[2]

During the period of study, I also attended many community events and regularly hung out in key social spaces, particularly pubs, betting houses, job corners, parks and sporting events in the study neighbourhoods. In these settings, I often struck up conversations with men about the pandemic and what life was like for them, as men, during the period. The study was reviewed and approved by the International Center

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[1] Nigeria's NPC generates and maintains a census of houses in Nigeria. Housing lists for any locality in the country are available on request from NPC offices nationwide. For more information on the NPC, see <https://nationalpopulation.gov.ng/>.

[2] Participants were presented with the food items after the interviews and were unaware that they would receive anything prior to consenting to participate.

for Research on Women and the National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria.

Analysis and limitations

Interview transcripts form the study data. The interview data was concurrently, but independently, coded by two paid qualitative data analysts, relying on Creswell's (2013) version of grounded theory and analysis. Following Izugbara and Egesa's (2014) technique, the analysts and author assessed the coding results to guarantee inter-coder concordance and agreed on a codebook that reflected the thematic groupings of the interview questions and the significant concerns emerging from the data. Transcribed interviews were then coded in NVivo using the codebook that was produced together. Both a deductive strategy that drew on the topic guide and an inductive one that enabled themes to develop from transcribed material made it easier to find key and common themes. Ongoing and iterative investigation of the research responses and narratives allowed me to find categories, relationships and features in the data (Baptist and Befani 2015). Where applicable, I utilize verbatim quotes from my respondents to illustrate topical issues.

Interviews have many shortcomings that can influence research results (Lamont and Swidler 2014), including preventing respondents from revealing certain practices and behaviours such as violence (Ruiz-Pérez *et al.* 2007). It is not unlikely that the men I studied reported only aspects of their pandemic lives that would make them look good. However, by framing my research around directly learning from the men about their lived experiences of the pandemic, I created a situation in which they shared deeply personal stories and accounts of living through the pandemic. The enthusiasm with which most of the men spoke about the pandemic period, as well as the deeply personal accounts they shared, suggests to me that my research provided them with a rare opportunity to reflect candidly on a difficult period in their lives, from which many of them said they were still recovering.

Men and Covid-19 in Aba City

Various perspectives on the origin of Covid-19 circulated among the men I studied, each rooted in local understandings of global political economy. One account stressed that the disease was new, frequently blamed China and the global North for it, and cast it as the result of advanced countries' constant meddling with nature. In a discourse that reproduced historically entrenched stereotypes about the Chinese, a variant of the narrative suggested that Covid-19 jumped to humans through the non-discriminatory foodways of the Chinese. In other accounts, parallels were drawn between HIV and Covid-19, with claims that HIV jumped into humankind through bestiality among white people. 'It's just difficult to say what animal these white people had sex with or ate and brought this Covid. It's the same way they brought HIV,' I was told during a group discussion, to which several respondents agreed.

Reminiscent of Covid-19 conspiracy theories (Bernard *et al.* 2020; Douglas 2021; Moffitt *et al.* 2021), some narratives suggested that the virus was created in a laboratory. Covid-19 biological warfare conspiracy theories found expression in beliefs that the virus was invented by China or the USA to attack and destabilize the

other. Thirty-six-year-old Ikechi told me: 'You know that China and America are constantly fighting for supremacy … I think one of them created the virus to destabilize the other … Do you know how much they made selling the vaccines? Millions! That's why the virus was created.'

Also common were sentiments that talked back to official accounts of the pandemic. Narratives alluded to a collusion between global capitalism and international institutions to use Covid-19 to diminish Africa's population. Participants regaled me with talk about how the global North envies Africa's large population, sees it as a threat, and, for a long time, has been devising ways to reduce it. 'They tried using family planning and HIV without much result,' one man told me. In his longer narrative and those of several others, Covid-19 was designed to hurt Africans. The plan, however, failed. The biology of the African was too versatile and strong for the virus, many noted. In the poignant words of one man, 'White people's plan did not work; instead, God punished them … They lost more people. We are cautious with the vaccines … They could have concealed another dangerous sickness in it.'

Not only did the men know the risks for and symptoms of the disease, but they also knew people who had received a positive diagnosis. Further, both first-hand knowledge of individuals who died from the virus and mentions of the names of well-known Nigerians killed by it were common. Respondents were aware that the first Covid-19 diagnosis in Nigeria occurred in a foreigner arriving from Italy. In many instances, narrative data supported existing literature (Campbell and McCaslin 2020) about citizen dissatisfaction with the management of the pandemic by the Nigerian government. Participants commonly blamed the Nigerian government's inability to regulate the borders for the devastation that the pandemic caused in the country and also frequently stated that relief materials provided during the period were hoarded and stolen by government officials. 'Everything would have been fine if Nigeria secured its borders well. But this is Nigeria … few things work … our leaders also played politics with the relief materials that were to help us survive the times,' one man asserted.

Awareness and practice of Covid-19 prevention methods were high among the respondents. However, formal public health prevention strategies were often combined with lay prevention or treatment strategies. Local gin, *kai kai*, was said to keep the body warm and to throw off the virus. Local roots and herbs were frequently blended into the gin for potency. Obinna maintained a regular regimen of *kai kai* and bitter kola during that time, noting: 'We regularly sanitized our throats and internal organs with good *kai kai* and bitter kola.' Throughout the pandemic, thirty-nine-year-old Nkire, a loader in one of Aba's popular motor parks, religiously observed public health instructions about masking. But he also started his day with local gin mixed with herbs to keep the body warm. Some of his workmates contracted the virus, but Nkire did not, which he attributed to his home-made gin cocktail.

Local herbal remedies were also widely marketed as both treatment and prophylaxis in Aba during the pandemic. Nedu, who bought one of them, told me it was effective. During the pandemic, when public transportation became scarce, he continued to work as a motorcycle transporter, ferrying commuters to different neighbourhoods on his Jincheng motorbike. But he never contracted the virus. There was also Agha, who claimed that he and his wife contracted the virus. He went to a local medicine store and requested strong malaria drugs and vitamin tablets. Within

three days of self-medication, Agha and his wife felt better. When I asked him how he knew it was Covid-19, he replied that it felt like severe malaria, accompanied by a cough, chest congestion and generalized body pain. Home vapour therapies involving herbal and non-herbal materials were also a frequently used preventive practice among the men.

Masculine anxiety during a pandemic

The precariousness of manhood is a popular topic in the literature on men (Vandello *et al.* 2008; 2023; Vandello and Bosson 2013). DiMuccio and Knowles (2020) opine that situations that put pressure on men's ability to earn and prove their manhood trigger anxiety. The expectation for males to actively achieve and sustain their high-value status as men through economic power and income can cause them anxiety in times of economic uncertainty (Bosson *et al.* 2013; Heesacker and Snowden 2013). Some authors have noted that Covid-19 constrained men's earning ability (Medrado *et al.* 2021; Santos *et al.* 2021; Wojnicka 2022).

A major theme in the narratives of the men I studied was the anxiety they experienced as the pandemic began to threaten their earning and provisioning capacity. Informants noted that, during the initial stages of the pandemic, they were mostly concerned about becoming infected. Interestingly, even when they discussed their fears regarding Covid-19, economic and livelihood concerns dominated. The men constituted being healthy and staying uninfected as essential to their ability to provide during a particularly challenging time, earn income and maintain financial stability, fulfil their duty as breadwinners, and sustain an image of lasting physical well-being and strength. In other words, they fretted about getting infected primarily because it indicated weakness or would prohibit them from pursuing livelihood activities and providing effectively for themselves and their families. The men's worries frequently extended to concerns about the fate of wards and families should they die as well as how being ill would affect their earnings and their capacity to provide during a particularly tough period. These fears, respondents told me, were often heightened by news and stories about wealthy and influential people who had died from the disease or had spent a lot on treatment.

Ordinarily, according to the men, they would not worry over minor colds or even more potentially deadly but familiar diseases. They reported having suffered from malaria, cholera, bad colds and typhoid, but often continued to work. One of the men said that he is diabetic but it does not stop his work as a painter and mason. For the men generally, many unknowns surrounded Covid-19. 'The way they talked about the disease, it was not ordinary. We have malaria all the time, and still go about,' reported thirty-year-old itinerant phone accessory seller Monye. 'But Covid really made us fear . . . I personally feared like a woman. It was like I was not a man. I worried about how my children and wife would carry on if I died or got very sick. I really feared.'

As the impact of lockdowns and movement restrictions took its toll, livelihood and economic anxieties supplanted health worries. My interlocutors detailed how, after the stay-at-home orders went into effect, they faced more pressing concerns related to their capacity to provide. Jonah, a forty-two-year-old *keke* (tricycle) operator, could hardly feed his family a week into the national lockdown. His rent was also due, and his expectant wife needed urgent medical attention. His anxieties switched to how his

family would survive; how he would fulfil his role as a breadwinner and provider. He recalled that his wife complained about their financial situation. 'She was really agitated and once said something like, "If I die with this pregnancy, please know that it is because of you." I just told her things would be fine, but I was really feeling that I was failing in my duties.' The experiences of most of the men I studied paralleled Jonah's. They were mostly self-employed, low-wage labourers, irregular workers, small-business owners, local artisans and craftsmen, traders and unskilled workers. All of them had dependants to support or provide for. Pre-pandemic, their incomes and savings were modest. Their capacity to deal with catastrophic economic circumstances and prolonged periods of unemployment was limited. In sum, they had precarious livelihoods and limited social protection. Soon after the lockdown, their economic marginality worsened.

Forty-two-year-old Obinna's major worry during the period was how to sustain his five-member nuclear family. The patronage of his roadside tyre-mending business had fizzled out. In normal times, Obinna made about 6,000 naira daily fixing tyres and filling air for motorists. His clientele primarily comprised tricycle drivers and operators, locally called *keke*, who constitute the mainstay of transportation in Aba. Movement restrictions and stay-at-home orders implemented during the pandemic had severely limited the operations of *keke* operators as commuters were increasingly rare to find. Local artist and signage maker Ebere was also exasperated during the pandemic. Typically, he enjoyed a booming business that catered for an array of clientele. However, his business shuttered during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, Ebere would easily make 7,000 naira daily (about US$10 at the pre-pandemic exchange rate). Like Obinna, Ebere worried a lot about how to provide for his family and support his numerous dependants, including two aged parents. His savings were modest and most of the people he would typically borrow from were also experiencing difficulties.

The pandemic compelled the men to stay at home against their will, shattering their self-notions as people who worked outside the home (Wafula 2020). Men told me how, pre-pandemic, they would go out and return at will. But the times were now different. As one man aptly noted: 'Even during war, men go out. But the pandemic was more than war. The enemy was everywhere, in the air, market, church, pub! We all stayed at home.' Narratives suggested that real men do not spend so much time at home. Going out and facing the outside world were central to proving oneself as a man and earning money to support families and dependants. John had never spent as much time with his family as he did during the lockdown. His children are often asleep when he leaves and returns from work, but during Covid he adjusted. 'I became like a woman who stays at home. I was there when my children went to bed and woke up.' Informants also spoke about how they supported domestic work that their wives, children or girlfriends typically performed.

From the narratives I collected, tensions and quarrels with wives and girlfriends were not uncommon during the pandemic. Interestingly, interlocutors frequently blamed these tensions on their wives' unease with their (the men's) diminished provisioning capacity. 'Before Covid, I will leave in the morning for work and come back in the evening. But during the lockdowns, I was often at home which made my wife worry ... She did not like to see me hang around the house like a jobless man. I also did not like it either. It made me feel bad,' one man stated. Akachi, a cashier in a bakery, was laid off during the pandemic and could no longer support his live-in

girlfriend, an apprentice fashion designer. When things became too tough, his girlfriend travelled to Port Harcourt to live with her sister. She later called Akachi and told him that he should forget about her. Akachi later learned that she is now dating a cosmetic shop owner in the city of Port Harcourt. Reflecting on his loss, he noted: 'She left me because I was no longer able to provide for her. That's what happens to men when you have no money.'

Managing masculinity during a pandemic

To maintain their masculine identities, men continuously enact and reinvent themselves in ways responsive to the different circumstances around them (Wilson 1969). The Aba men I studied regularly stressed how they reconstituted and reordered their priorities to deal with the tensions and uncertainties created by the pandemic. Regardless of how much I asked and probed, the stories of the men's lives during the pandemic (as they told them to me) revealed little evidence of their resort to hypermasculine practices, capitulation to incapacitating despair, or disproportionate displays of irritability and bad temper. While not inconceivable that they hid these parts of their pandemic lives from me, it is interesting that the narratives I collected suggested a strategic reconstitution of manliness ideals; a reordering of the men's notions and practices of masculinity to reduce their risk of despair, violent behaviour and poor health, while also maintaining their status as breadwinners. 'Things were tough, and we were worried. But as a man, you know that getting angry or worrying all the time will only hurt you. We pushed on … Covid brought out the man in me. We all had to adjust or die. My wife and I had to discuss how to manage,' one respondent claimed. 'I discovered during the pandemic that as a man I had to think hard and make adjustments to survive.' 'If you worry too much, you will cause another problem for yourself. It was not our fault. Why will I get angry with my family or myself over something caused by the Chinese?,' another interlocutor pondered.

Among my study participants, and contrary to views that toxic masculine practices were a hallmark of low-income men's behaviours during the pandemic (Madigele and Baloyi 2022; Mehta *et al.* 2020; Ndlovu *et al.* 2022; Santos *et al.* 2021), managing oneself as a man during the pandemic sometimes required resorting to actions or practices that were not typically associated with masculinity. These actions included acknowledging and acting on one's susceptibility to the disease and paying attention to one's health; retreating from the public sphere; seeking help from unlikely sources; getting involved in domestic work; and decreasing one's obligations to relationships that reinforce a masculine ego. Remarkably, the men firmly constituted these actions as manly, emphasizing how altering one's behaviours in the face of new realities was an important symbol of 'real' manliness. In other words, the men I studied constituted situational adaptability as the key masculine value that helped them live through the tensions and uncertainties of the pandemic period.

Retreating from public spaces, following health orders, staying at home, acknowledging and acting on one's own susceptibility to the disease, adopting healthier practices and paying attention to one's health were among the ways in which men in my study performed their manliness during the pandemic. Put differently, the behaviours of the men at the time challenged widely held assumptions that associate masculinity with delaying treatment seeking, a sense of invulnerability,

poor self-care, and a reckless attitude to and defiance of health recommendations. When the pandemic hit Nigeria, Chike, a fifty-year-old man, said that he was very scared, not just for himself but for his family. The public health messages that circulated about Covid-19 presented it as a dangerous disease. It could be contracted through the air, through physical contact, or by being in a crowd. No context was safe. Chike recalled his mindset at the time: 'I realized that I and my family could easily contract Covid. I had to be a man and avoided the disease by not going out much or being in crowded settings.' Chike also taught his family how to prevent the disease. He recalled that he missed major events during the time, including two funerals in his village, in which, as a lineage elder, his presence was required. In his longer narrative, Chike told me that his main reason for not attending those important funerals was not fear of contracting Covid. 'I also had to lead by example … I told my wife and children to avoid public places, and I could not turn around and attend funerals. I could lose their respect. They may also think I don't care. You also know that at these funerals you also spend money. I did not want to go there and spend the little money that I was using to sustain my family,' he noted.

The data I collected showed that, pre-pandemic, the men spent time together in local pubs and other settings in the evenings; men stayed out to drink, play local games of ludo, whot or checkers, or just sat out bantering with their male peers. My informants' descriptions of these leisure-oriented 'homosocial' settings constituted them as sites for male–male bonding and the performance of masculinity (de Almeida 1997). However, the pandemic forced them to retreat from these settings. Forty-seven-year-old Okoro recalled that, before the pandemic, he normally spent time together with male friends in a neighbourhood pub. He would stay there until his son came to call him home for dinner. He observed: 'If somebody told me that a time would come when I, Okoro, would fear staying out late and be with my friends before going home, I would say it will not happen even if there was war.' As my discussion with Okoro progressed, he made the point that Covid-19 transformed these leisurely homosocial settings into settings of danger. When I asked him whether staying indoors due to fear of Covid-19 made him feel less than a man, he was quick to observe that being a man entails knowing when to avoid the things one hitherto enjoyed. Thumbing his chest, he added: 'As a man, one must know when danger is lurking out there and avoid it. Being a man does not mean that you see fire and run into it. Of course, I missed hanging out with friends, but since it was not very safe out there, most of us [men] became overly cautious of the places that we hitherto enjoyed.'

Further, the narratives of the men I studied indicated that to cope with the economic challenges posed by the pandemic, they sometimes sought support and assistance from other people. However, as their colleagues and close friends were also under similar financial stress, it was often pointless to ask them for help. Interestingly, the men told me that the sources they turned to for support were persons they typically would provide for (parents, in-laws, girlfriends, wives, house helps, villagers, etc.), rather than seek help from. Remarkably, too, the men's narratives framed their pandemic assistance-seeking behaviours as part of the necessary masculine restructuring that real men constantly employ to survive – and, most importantly, to sustain their image as breadwinners and providers.

As we mulled over what life was like during the lockdown, Amanna recollected that there was a week when he had nothing to feed his family of five. Before the pandemic, if he needed a loan, his best bet was his good friend, Joe, a used-clothing dealer in Aba's famed Ariaria market. But Joe was also having his own tough time managing his family of six. It would have been inconsiderate of him to ask Joe for a loan. Amanna had to borrow money from a woman to support his family during the period, negating beliefs that men should be benefactors to women. The woman was a teacher in the primary school his children attended. She was a government employee, and her salary was maintained during the pandemic. In normal times, Amanna used to tip the woman for keeping an eye on his children in school. Looking straight into my eyes, Amanna asserted: 'I would not normally borrow money from a woman, even my wife or mother. It is not something that men should do. Men give women money. But as a man, you also need to think hard and do everything to support your family.' Amanna's account resonated strongly with the evidence I elicited from my other informants. In one case, a respondent travelled to his village during the pandemic to look for food and money to feed his family. In normal times, his village kin looked up to him for money, food and clothing. Another unmarried daily labourer, Okechi, lost his job during the pandemic and told me that he borrowed money from his girlfriend twice at that time. Laughing, he told me, 'It required courage to approach her for money. I lied to her about my mother's illness and that her treatment required more money than I had. But the money was really meant to support me and my brother, who lives with me.' In his longer narrative, Okechi clarified that this was the first time in his adult life that he had asked a woman for financial help and that he took the step because he could not face seeing his brother go hungry during that period. 'But you know, as a man, you must find a way out of tricky situations. I paid her back immediately I resumed work to avoid disrespect,' he asserted.

The men's narratives comprised clear assertions that, as the livelihood crisis intensified, they discovered that some of the relationships they maintained became a source of significant stress for them. As I sought more information about these relationships, I discovered that, while they propped up the men's masculine ego and reputation, these relationships also substantially obligated them financially. For example, several married and unmarried men in the study noted that having girlfriends boosted their prestige and respectability among peers. Married men admitted to having girlfriends, whom they occasionally brought along on leisure outings and to parties and nightclubs, to the envy of their peers. The men's stories of their engagements and relationships with their local communities, particularly their rural villages of origin, followed a similar logic. These engagements boosted their local reputation and recognition as men, but they also cost the men money and resources.

However, amidst income declines, depletion of savings, loss of businesses and livelihood uncertainties triggered by the pandemic, obligations associated with these relationships became difficult for the men to sustain. Ordinarily, as my interlocutors repeatedly told me, Igbo culture expects men to provide for their families and girlfriends, help friends, support their communities and assist members of their extended family. To deal with the pandemic's economic uncertainties and pressures on them as men, some men cut off many of these masculinity-affirming relationships, focusing instead on their immediate family breadwinner roles or on ensuring that

they could adequately cater for themselves. Frequently, and often with glee, my informants told me stories of how they cleverly cut these relationships off or reduced commitments to them.

Osakwe, a married man in his mid-forties, severed his relationship with his girlfriend during the lockdown. He was an electrician, and work had become difficult to come by. As his savings depleted, he could hardly combine his familial responsibilities with giving his girlfriend her weekly allowance. He also had elderly parents to support. Osakwe's narratives suggested that his girlfriend was key to his masculine reputation. His friends respected him for having a beautiful girlfriend, and he often showed her off to friends. 'Friends often ask me, "Osakwe, how did you charm this fine lady?" and I would say to them that only real men like me can keep such a woman.' Osakwe's narratives suggested that he liked the woman very much and did his best to keep her comfortable and from being snatched by other men. However, as he noted, he realized that he could no longer sustain the relationship during the pandemic. Drawing on notions of responsible masculinity, he told me he realized that his continued liaison with the woman was hurting his family responsibilities. He accused her of infidelity and cut off the relationship. 'You know, the truth was that there was no way I could take the shame of telling her that I was broke … I could not continue giving her money … so, as a man, I thought hard about what to do and came up with what to tell her. A real man must be able to change course when things become difficult.' Osakwe told me that, after the pandemic was over and his business recovered, he reconciled with the woman.

While they stayed home during the pandemic, several men, including Osakwe and Amanna, reported that they took over some of the domestic tasks that their girlfriends, wives or children had previously performed. They cleaned the house, cooked, washed clothing and watched the children. Little indication existed in the data I gathered that such tasks annoyed the men or made them feel less manly. Interestingly, judging by the men's narratives, performing those tasks saved them resources, prevented conflicts with their wives and girlfriends, and secured their respect as men at a time when their capacity to provide was shaky.

During the pandemic, Silas, a car mechanic, helped his wife in her roadside business selling bean cake. He took over the duties of washing the kitchen utensils for his wife's business, packaging the snacks, and manually grinding the beans for her. He also laid off the woman who he previously paid to perform these activities for his wife. Aside from mentioning that his wife was very appreciative and happy about the assistance, Silas told me that by taking on these responsibilities he saved money because he was the one who normally paid the lady who assists his wife.

> I can tell you that what I really wanted to do was save money, which is why I took over those tasks and asked the woman who assisted her to stop coming. It would have been a strain on me to continue paying her since my business was down. The money I saved went into supporting my family during the lockdown. I used to get up early – sometimes by 4 a.m. – and everything will be ready by the time my wife wakes up to make the snacks, and she will be happy. I was just being shrewd as a man, saving my resources, while also keeping my wife happy and respectful.

Concluding thoughts

One of my study participants, Nathy, asked me a question as I was wrapping up my research. He wanted to know if I expected men to risk their lives during Covid-19 to ensure the well-being of their dependants. My response was that cultural expectations implied so. Nathy replied by telling me that I did not understand Igbo culture. He proceeded to lecture me on manliness in the Igbo worldview:

> Igbo culture expects men to be wise, not stupid. Wisdom is what distinguishes you as a man. Our culture expects a man to do his best in all situations . . . but it does not mean you have to kill yourself for others. I am a man, and I can tell you that I know that losing today does not imply that you will not win tomorrow. A real man stays alive to provide for his family by evaluating situations and deciding how best to act.

Nathy's point illustrates the dynamism associated with masculinity among the men I studied. Extant explanations of men's behaviours during the Covid-19 pandemic emphasize how norms of masculinity drove them into despair and to be reckless, ignore prevention guidelines, delay treatment seeking, feel invincible, and neglect self-care (Mahalik *et al.* 2022b; Ndlovu *et al.* 2022; Usta *et al.* 2021; Wafula 2020). Literature is replete with claims that the economic crises and uncertainties caused by the pandemic devastated men's perceptions of themselves as indefatigable providers, people in charge of their own fate, and people who primarily operate in non-domestic spaces, driving them into toxic or harm-doing practices, particularly sexual and gender-based violence. As I noted earlier, this viewpoint is magisterially espoused in several documents, including a UN report that asserted that men's anxieties about their masculinity during the pandemic manifested in rage and violence towards wives and children.

The data I have presented in this study indicates that, while the pandemic put formidable pressure on the masculine identities of my informants, it did not necessarily result in hypermasculine behaviours. Rather, among the men I studied, there was evidence of a deliberate reconstitution and reordering of their priorities as well as their notions and practices of masculinity to reduce their risk of despair, violent behaviour and poor health, even as they strived hard to retain their provider identity or to sustain themselves as individuals. While there is agreement that masculinity is situational, research on Covid-19 and masculinity is dominated by a focus on violent masculine deployments at the time. My data supports claims by Karadeniz and Çakmakcı (2021) that the pandemic surfaced masculine expressions that undermined traditional gender role distinctions at the household level and encouraged cooperation rather than conflict. However, the evidence I have presented also suggests that the men's non-traditional masculine actions during the pandemic focused on preserving and upholding their own gendered powers in relationships and reinforcing notions of men as astute and all-weather providers.

When men in my study did domestic work, served in their wives' home-based businesses, did not respond to calls for material support from their rural origins, or borrowed money from girlfriends, they explained their actions in terms of the adaptability that real men must deploy to maintain their power in intimate

relationships and respectability. Put differently, while little evidence of hypermascu-line, toxic practices was evident in the men's pandemic narratives, managing their identities as men during the pandemic entailed practices that helped hold them up as capable breadwinners and guaranteed them the dividends that came with that image, including the continued control over and respect of wives, children and girlfriends.

Barker *et al.* (2021) and Baral (2021) argue that the pandemic prompted men to take on board previously unexplored aspects of masculinity. The men I studied embraced self-care and acted on their own susceptibility to the virus, followed health guidelines, resigned themselves to and endured domesticity, sought help from sources that men were not expected to seek help from, became more involved in domestic work, and cut their obligations to relations that hitherto bolstered their masculine ego. Their explanations for these behaviours drew on notions of adaptability as emblematic of genuine manliness. In other words, the definitive sign of masculine weakness during the pandemic was not the men's lack of control over the situation, but rather their inability to adjust to the times, to reinvent themselves in the face of the crisis wrought by the pandemic period, and, more importantly, to discontinue practices that, while once essential to masculine identity, had now become unsustainable as they strove to perform themselves as men.

Crises reconfigure values and reshuffle social orders (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). As processes that are beyond individual control and force change in everyday life, crises subvert faith in routine practices and ideals, inspiring creative strategies that allow people to hold on to increasingly threatened or elusive resources. In his study of Cuban men's affective, moral and pragmatic concerns as they navigated personal economic hardship, Simoni (2015) highlighted the crisscrossing traffic of different models and vectors of masculinity and their contrasting deployments in a variety of contexts and at various levels. Like the men I studied, the successes or failures of the men whom Simoni studied depended on their skills and proficiency in enacting a variety of masculinities, and in integrating and feeling comfortable with them. However, among my respondents, the ultimate measure of this success was the extent to which these deployments preserved and reinforced their statuses as astute and versatile providers.

While my findings suggest the dynamic, situated, tentative and paradoxical enactments of masculinity during the pandemic, I do not intend to imply that there were no men who resorted to violent gender expressions to maintain their power in gender relations or who became too depressed and lashed out on those around them. Rather, my point is to demonstrate how the multiple and contradictory paths that masculinity took during the pandemic can simultaneously give the impression that some men are embracing progressive masculine expressions or taking on board previously unexplored aspects of masculinity, while also reinforcing the dominance of traditional masculine roles and power, patriarchal dividends and gender inequality (Schmidt 2024).

As recent theorizations on hybrid masculinities suggest, while drastic changes in men's living conditions can challenge normative ideals of masculinity, they can also fertilize the emergence of 'tactical alternative' performances of masculinity that may only obscure the tenacity of gendered power relations and conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This applies to the men I studied. While some men may hold on

to hegemonic masculine norms or take traditional masculine roles to the extreme, their peers in the same situation can act as if patriarchy has been dismantled; and yet others may dissociate themselves from recognizably dominant masculine norms (Arxer 2011; Barry and Weiner 2019; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Hennessy 1994; Izugbara 2015; Schmidt 2024).

The men I studied may not have revealed evidence of their resort to toxic masculine practices to maintain their image as men during the pandemic. But they strategically aligned themselves with practices that reinforced and assured their power in gendered relationships, tactically re-actualizing and reworking themselves in line with an identity project driven primarily by the trope of 'real men' as indefatigable providers. More critical scholarly attention to the everyday tactical manoeuvrability of masculinity can advance theory, enrich programming, and deepen understanding of the prospects and challenges of transforming men into true allies for the gender equality movement.

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