

From Stigma to Support: Transforming Men's Mental Health through Legal and Cultural Change in India

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Abstract: -

Men's mental health in India is in dire straits, obscured by social conventions and cultural expectations that associate weakness with vulnerability. This study investigates the complex connection between Indian men's reluctance to seek mental health therapy and traditional masculinity. The expectation in society for men to be stoic, self-sufficient, and emotionally restrained creates a calm and solitary atmosphere. Often, men are discouraged from expressing their feelings or getting help, which exacerbates mental health conditions and creates a vicious circle of misery. The study examines the ways in which these deeply ingrained societal standards impact men's mental health and make it more challenging for them to receive the necessary assistance. Redefining masculinity and tearing down damaging stereotypes are crucial first steps in creating a more welcoming and encouraging atmosphere, it contends. This effort attempts to address the particular difficulties experienced by Indian males and open the door to better mental health outcomes by supporting a change in cultural attitudes and encouraging candid communication. This calls for establishing environments where asking for assistance is perceived as brave and vulnerability as a strength, eventually changing the discourse around men's mental health in India.

Keyword:- Men's mental health, suicide prevention, Emotional repression, Masculinity and stigma

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

(Breaking the Silence)

Imagine a statistic so stark it could stop a nation in its tracks: **According to ICMR (2023), one in seven Indian men suffers from a mental health illness¹**. Imagine now that this hidden struggle has led to an even more tragic outcome: In 2022, men accounted for over 122,000 of India's nearly 171,000 suicide deaths, according to NCRB.² This means men die by suicide at more than twice the rate of women, making up approximately 72.5% of all such deaths. (Voice for Men India, 2022)³. These aren't just numbers; they are fathers, brothers, sons, husbands, boyfriends and friends, each representing a life cut short, a potential unrealized, and a family left in mourning. Yet, despite these alarming figures, the discourse on mental health in India often overlooks the unique struggles and challenges faced by men, leaving them to navigate a system that is often ill-equipped to address their specific needs. But beyond statistics lies a more nuanced story, one that this research endeavors to tell. Consider the stark reality that, according to experts, approximately **40% of Indian men** avoid discussing their mental health openly, fearing the stigma associated with it (NDTV, 2024). Alarmingly, suicide has emerged as the primary cause of death among Indian males between 15 and 39 years, as per the Global Burden of Disease Study (2017)⁴. These realities underscore a critical gap in our understanding and response to men's mental health, one that demands urgent attention and action.

One of the most major impediments to resolving India's mental health issue is the widespread stigma associated with mental illness, particularly among men. In traditional views of masculinity, showing vulnerability is often equated with weakness, deterring men from seeking assistance or simply admitting their problems. This is exacerbated by social expectations that

¹ ICMR (2022). *Mental Health Status in Indian Men*. icmr.nic.in

² NCRB (2023). *Crime in India: Suicide Statistics*. ncrb.gov.in

³ Voice For Men India (2023). *Silent Sufferers Series*. voiceformenindia.com

⁴ **Global Burden of Disease Study**, *Suicide is Now the Leading Cause of Death for Indian Men Aged 15–39*, INST. FOR HEALTH METRICS & EVALUATION (2017), <https://www.healthdata.org/news-release/suicide-now-leading-cause-death-young-indian-men>.

males must be tough, stoic, and self-sufficient, expected to weather every challenge in silence. According to **Dr. Samir Kumar Praharaj, Professor and Head of the Department of Psychiatry at Kasturba Medical College and Hospitals, MAHE, Manipal, over 40% of men in India avoid openly discussing their mental health because to the stigma associated with it (NDTV, 2024⁵).**

In addition to keeping males from asking for assistance, this culture of silence feeds a vicious cycle of loneliness and humiliation. Men who are experiencing mental health problems could feel alone because they are afraid of being judged or made fun of by their family, friends, and even medical professionals. Their illness may worsen as a result, and their risk of suicide may rise. This problem is further highlighted by data from the Government of India's KIRAN mental health helpline, which shows that since its launch in September 2020, **70% of all calls have been from men (Healthians, 2024⁶).** Men between the ages of 15 and 40 made up an astounding **76.8% of these calls**, underscoring the critical need for focused treatments for men.

This goes beyond research and is a call to action. It seeks to break the taboo around men's mental health in India and expose the complex web of social expectations, cultural norms, and structural weaknesses that contribute to this epidemic. This post aims to initiate a national conversation, advocate for a mental healthcare system that recognizes and addresses male-specific needs, and ultimately save lives by bringing attention to the invisible struggles encountered by Indian men.

1.1 The Cultural Invisibility of Men's Mental Health

Imagine a boy, no older than six, tripping over his untied shoelaces. His knee stings, his eyes well up, but before the first tear falls, a voice interrupts: "Big boys don't cry." That moment—seemingly small—becomes a cornerstone in a lifelong lesson about masculinity. From childhood, boys are taught to swallow their pain, to wear stoicism like armor. This cultural script, centuries in the making, equates being a man with emotional suppression. Historically, men were cast as protectors, warriors, and providers—roles demanding unwavering strength. Fear, doubt, and vulnerability were seen as liabilities, emotions to be buried beneath a facade of control. Over

⁵ NDTV (2024). *Men and Mental Health Awareness Special*. <https://www.ndtv.com/>

⁶ Healthians (2023). *Why Indian Men Need Therapy Too*. healthians.com

generations, these expectations hardened into unspoken rules: real men don't falter, don't weep, don't break.

But this stoic ideal comes at a cost. By adulthood, that boy has learned to silence his inner world. Stress, grief, and anxiety simmer beneath the surface, masked by jokes, anger, or silence. Men often cope alone, fearing judgment if they admit struggle. They might turn to substances, workaholicism, or isolation, anything to avoid the shame of appearing "weak." The statistics are stark: globally, men die by suicide at rates far exceeding women's, a tragic reflection of how cultural norms can turn pain into poison. Yet even in crisis, many men avoid reaching out, trapped by the belief that suffering in silence is nobler than seeking help. The roots of this crisis run deep. Stoicism, often praised as resilience, becomes a trap when it demands total emotional detachment. Vulnerability is framed not as human but as feminine—a betrayal of masculinity. In male-dominated spaces, from locker rooms to boardrooms, admitting fear or sadness risks ridicule or ostracism. The message is clear: to be a man is to endure, not to feel. This cultural invisibility isn't just harmful—it's lethal. It isolates men from their own humanity, teaching them to view their emotions as enemies.

Dismantling these antiquated scripts is necessary for healing. It entails demonstrating to guys at a young age that crying is a sign of bravery rather than weakness. It entails redefining vulnerability as strength and honouring guys who talk candidly about their difficulties. Communities, schools, and workplaces must provide environments where men may open up without feeling embarrassed and where asking for assistance is viewed as courageous rather than weak. The goal of redefining masculinity is to embrace compassion, self-awareness, and the humility to admit when something is wrong, rather than to reject strength. The phantom limb of men's unsaid suffering won't go away overnight, but we get closer to a society where men's mental health isn't shrouded in darkness but is instead lovingly held in the light with each open discussion and revised norm.

CHAPTER 2: THE DUALITY OF MASCULINITY – A CONFLICT OF NORMS

He was told 'men don't cry'—but what happens when silence becomes fatal? Beneath this cultural directive is a maze of contradictory standards: the human need for vulnerability collides with the demand to project stoic self-reliance, resulting in a crisis where emotional repression

has fatal consequences. Fundamentally, masculinity manifests as a battlefield of expectations rather than a monolith—stiff notions of control and domination clash with changing conceptions of strength and authenticity.

This problem stems from the fact that masculinity is socially created. The socially constructed duties, behaviours, and expectations that come with being a male constitute masculinity, which is not a fixed biological trait. These standards, which are frequently instilled in children by classmates, family, the media, and cultural organisations, specify how males must act and show themselves to the outside world. Strongness, independence, emotional stoicism, self-reliance, and domination are features that are traditionally emphasised by hegemonic masculinity, the dominant style of masculinity. Even though they are portrayed as aspirational, these principles can backfire when they clash with the fact that people are vulnerable and require assistance.

In her groundbreaking work on masculinity, sociologist R.W. Connell highlights that not all men can achieve hegemonic masculinity and that it frequently functions by subordinating femininity and other types of masculinity. By forbidding actions deemed "unmanly," like expressing emotions or asking for assistance, this hierarchy serves to further reinforce the pressure on males to live up to the prevailing image. In cultures where conventional gender norms are thoroughly embedded, this pressure is especially strong. A considerable psychological weight may result from the strain to live up to these male standards. Because they see expressing feelings like grief, fear, or worry as a sign of weakness, men are frequently instructed to repress these emotions. Internal conflict and stress accumulation brought on by this emotional suppression might raise the likelihood of mental health issues. The idea that males should be independent and self-sufficient also deters men from getting assistance when they run into emotional or legal

problems. It's common to think that admitting when you need help is a sign that you don't meet the manly ideal of being independent.

For males in particular, the social stigma attached to getting treatment for mental health or legal problems serves as a strong disincentive. Negative preconceptions and ideas about people or groups that don't fit in with society's norms are the root cause of stigma. When it comes to mental health, this stigma frequently entails linking mental illness to being weak, inept, or even dangerous. Discrimination, social marginalisation, and a poor self-image are some ways this

might show up. Similar to this, getting legal assistance might be stigmatized by society, particularly if it is perceived as a sign of weakness or guilt.

The shame associated with asking for aid is exacerbated for males by gendered norms. The manly ideal of emotional stoicism and independence may be directly violated by seeking help, particularly for mental health issues. As a result of being branded as "weak," "unmanly," or even "feminine," males who seek therapy or legal assistance may experience social isolation, humiliation, and embarrassment. A strong deterrent may be the dread of criticism or mockery from coworkers, relatives, or classmates.

There are several ways that the stigma associated with asking for help is maintained. Men who seek assistance are frequently portrayed in the media as weak or emasculated, reinforcing negative preconceptions about mental illness and masculinity. Men may be discouraged from getting treatment by friends and family because of their own internalised biases or out of worry for their reputation. Men may be discouraged from publicly expressing weaknesses or requesting assistance in court situations due to adversarial cultures and preconceived notions about masculine aggressiveness.

The 2016 India Mental Health Survey⁷ offers strong proof of how stigma affects men's decision to seek assistance. Only 20–25% of males with mental illness ever seek care, according to the poll, which is a far lower percentage than that of women. This discrepancy highlights the strong impact of gendered social norms and the increased stigma that males experience when they seek mental health care. The poll also revealed that cultural perceptions frequently cause men's mental health problems to go unnoticed, which further delays access to quality care.

CHAPTER 3: THE INDIAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK – PROMISE VS PRACTICE

The scales of justice tip under the burden of rigid expectations placed upon men. Traditional masculinity, built on hiding emotions and seeking dominance, seeps into our legal system, coloring how laws are made, carried out, and experienced. Feminist legal theory provides a

⁷ Gururaj, G. et al., *National Mental Health Survey of India, 2016: Prevalence, Patterns and Outcomes*, 59(1) **INDIAN J. PSYCHIATRY** 21 (2017), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5419008/>.

critical lens for understanding this gendered view. This approach reveals how deeply-held ideas about men can harm men by suppressing their emotions.

Legal systems worldwide are built on the premise of impartiality, yet their application is inevitably filtered through cultural assumptions about gender. The “reasonable person” standard, a cornerstone of criminal law, often reflects a masculine ideal—emotionally detached, assertive, and controlled. This standard fails to account for how traditional masculinity pressures men to conform to behaviors that may escalate conflict or internalize distress. For instance, men socialized to equate vulnerability with weakness may avoid seeking help for mental health crises, leading to untreated conditions that manifest as aggression, substance abuse, or self-harm. When these behaviors intersect with legal proceedings—whether in criminal sentencing, custody disputes, or workplace discrimination cases—the underlying social pressures remain unexamined, reducing complex human experiences to individual moral failings.

This dynamic is best shown by the **criminal justice system**. The over-representation of men in jails is frequently ascribed to socioeconomic issues, but it is rarely examined from the perspective of gendered socialisation. Men may engage in financially risky or unlawful actions as a result of pressure to fulfil the roles of provider, protector, or “breadwinner,” especially in societies where conventional masculinity is closely associated with material success. Similarly, the judicial system punishes violent altercations that result from the idea that one should respond to perceived threats with physical dominance, but it ignores the cultural scripts that normalise aggressiveness as manly. Legal responses often default to punishment, sidelining rehabilitative approaches that could address root causes, perpetuating cycles of harm, despite feminist legal academics' contention that such norms are not just personal preferences but rather the result of institutional conditioning.

Another example of how masculine stereotypes lead to legal disadvantages is **family law**. Men who follow the rules are frequently punished in custody disputes by being viewed as emotionally aloof or incapable of providing care, while those who don't run the danger of being seen as not being enough authoritative. Fathers may find it difficult to express their emotional ties to their children in courtrooms that favour preconceptions of mothers providing care; this problem is made worse by cultural norms that dictate males should put money before caring for their children. This Catch-22 is a reflection of a judicial system that is forced to make binary

assumptions about parental competence because it is ill-equipped to acknowledge the variety of masculine expressions.

Mental health interventions within legal contexts underscore the crisis of silence. Men are less likely to disclose psychological distress due to stigma, leading to underdiagnosis and inadequate treatment. In criminal cases, undiagnosed mental health issues may exacerbate reckless or violent behavior, yet courts frequently lack the resources to address these root causes. The result is a revolving door of incarceration and recidivism, where men are punished for symptoms of untreated trauma or depression that society discourages them from acknowledging. This silence becomes fatal in the most literal sense: men account for a disproportionate majority of suicides, a trend intensified by legal stressors such as divorce, unemployment, or criminal charges

Feminist legal theory, while typically centred on women's subjection, gives critical tools for overcoming these relations. By understanding Masculinity is shaped by social norms, media, and interpersonal experiences—it is not an inherent biological identity but a learned framework., researchers such as Joan Scott highlight how legal systems codify and reinforce gender norms. For example, regulations governing self-defence or workplace harassment frequently mirror male-centric narratives of aggressiveness and invulnerability, ignoring how these standards damage men who do not conform. Critical legal theorists call for intersectional reforms that acknowledge how racism, class, and sexuality connect with masculinity, resulting in many vulnerabilities for marginalised males.

Sociological study emphasises the importance of this paradigm change. Adolescent relationship studies show that adhering to conventional masculinity is associated with coercive dispute resolution and decreased emotional closeness, tendencies that legal systems unintentionally perpetuate by normalising male authority. In Uganda, efforts encouraging gender-equitable masculinities have reduced intimate partner violence, suggesting that legal frameworks may actively influence cultural norms rather than passively reflect them. Similarly, programs that address male mental health through community-based conversation fight the stigma of vulnerability by providing examples for judicial systems to incorporate restorative justice and therapeutic jurisprudence.

Men's interactions with the judicial system are greatly influenced by gender stereotypes, which have an effect that goes beyond mental health. Conventional ideas of masculinity can affect how

men view the law, how they communicate with legal representatives, and eventually, how they might obtain justice. Men may be reluctant to disclose abuse they encounter in home situations, for instance, out of fear of mockery or incredulity. It's a common societal notion that males commit acts of violence rather than being the victims. As a result, law enforcement, social agencies, or even legal professionals may reject male victims. The unique needs and experiences of male victims of domestic abuse may not be sufficiently addressed by the judicial system, which is frequently implicitly gendered. The dearth of resources and support services specifically designed for males who are abused makes this situation even worse.

Gender stereotypes can also have an impact on child support and custody decisions in family court matters. Biases in judicial processes can be sustained by the traditional beliefs that women should be the primary carers and males should be the major breadwinners. Even if men are ready and able to care for their children, they may have a worse chance of receiving custody. Additionally, even if they are struggling financially, they could feel more obligation to provide for their kids. For males navigating the family law system, these prejudices can pose serious emotional and legal obstacles.

A helpful foundation for comprehending how legal institutions frequently mirror and uphold current power disparities, particularly those based on gender, is provided by critical legal theory. Critical legal academics contend that social, political, and economic considerations shape law rather than it being impartial or objective. Certain groups, particularly males who don't conform to traditional masculine stereotypes, may be disadvantaged by the interpretation and application of legal laws and processes. Critical legal theory assists us in recognising and combating the prejudices that prevent men from accessing justice by analysing the ways in which legal institutions are subtly gendered.

The lack of conversation on men's mental health is a stark critique of social structures that associate invulnerability with masculinity. This silence is a serious human rights violation that necessitates immediate and comprehensive legal action, making it more than merely a public health issue. We contend that current national and international legal frameworks offer the groundwork required to confront cultural norms that routinely deny men the right to express their emotions with dignity and the opportunity to get quality mental health care.

I. The Constitutional Imperative: Reclaiming the Right to a Life of Dignity

In *Francis Coralie Mullin v. The Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi & Ors.*, 1981⁸, the Supreme Court construed Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the "Right to Life," broadly to include a life of dignity, including mental well-being. This realisation emphasises that the right to life requires psychological integrity and being free from mental anguish, and it goes beyond just physical survival. But this fundamental provision is effectively nullified by social pressures that force males to repress their feelings. The stigma attached to getting mental health help increases the likelihood of suicide and self-harm by fostering a cycle of silence.

Furthermore, gendered practices that impede men's access to mental healthcare undercut the concept of equality before the law, which is contained in Article 14. The presumption that males ought to be stoic and independent leads to institutional discrimination, depriving them of the same resources and assistance that are easily accessible and socially acceptable for women. Therefore, the judicial system is required by the constitution to eliminate these discriminatory systems.

II India's Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA), 2017⁹

When India's Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA), 2017, declared mental health a universal right, it lit a beacon of hope—but for men shackled by stoicism, does this light reach the shadows where silence thrives?

When India's Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA), 2017 was passed, the promise of affordable and accessible mental healthcare struck a deep chord. The Act, which was hailed as a progressive step forward, sought to guarantee treatment access, eliminate stigmas, and defend the rights of those who are dealing with mental illness. Beneath the surface of advancement, though, comes an important question: has this historic law really helped everyone, especially Indian males who frequently deal with mental health issues in secret because of social pressure to be independent

⁸ *Francis Coralie Mullin Vs. The Administrator, Union Territory Of Delhi* [1981] 2 S.C.R. 516

⁹ India's Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA), 2017

and stoic? Decriminalising suicide attempts is a significant accomplishment of the Mental Health Care Act. An individual who attempts suicide will not be tried or punished under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) because, according to Section 115 of the Act, it would be assumed that they are experiencing extreme stress. Rather, the treatment, care, and rehabilitation of such persons must be provided by the government. By shifting the focus from punitive measures to a sympathetic and understanding response to mental anguish, this provision reflects a paradigm change. In India, where suicide rates are far higher than the world norm, this is especially important for men. In India, men are continuously responsible for a higher percentage of suicide fatalities than women, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)¹⁰. Decriminalisation eliminates the threat of legal consequences, which may persuade men to get assistance when they need it. However, the prompt and efficient deployment of support networks and mental health services for those experiencing distress is necessary for this offering to be successful.

While the MHCA's gender-neutral language aligns with legal equality, it risks erasing the unique challenges men face in seeking mental health support. The Act may ignore the unique demands and difficulties encountered by males by considering everyone as a homogeneous group. For males seeking mental health treatment, societal norms around masculinity—which are frequently defined by emotional control, power, and independence—can pose serious obstacles. Men are frequently conditioned to repress their feelings, find weakness in being vulnerable, and refrain from asking for assistance out of fear of shame and condemnation.

Even though the MHCA is progressive, there are still many obstacles to overcome before it can be effectively implemented, especially in rural India where access to mental health treatment is extremely restricted. In order to eliminate stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviour, the Act's effectiveness depends not only on its legislative structure but also on the availability of resources, qualified specialists, and awareness campaigns. Additionally, for the Act to be properly applied and for the rights of people with mental illness to be protected, legal literacy regarding it is essential among the general public as well as among members of the legal

¹⁰ NCRB. (2005). suicides in India. Various Issues, National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.

profession. A notable weakness in the Act is the absence of explicit sections addressing topics such as the effects of social pressures on men's mental health or male victims of domestic abuse. Even though domestic abuse is acknowledged by law, male victims are frequently discouraged from seeking assistance due to the shame associated with it. The Act may be improved by specifically recognising these difficulties and offering particular assistance and resources to males who are going through such trauma.

A law that promised equality now faces its hardest test: Can it rewrite the script of masculinity that keeps men's suffering in the margins?

CHAPTER 4: REFORM AGENDA – TOWARDS GENDER-INCLUSIVE MENTAL HEALTH LAW

Men's mental health remains critically underserved—not due to a lack of suffering, but due to systemic blindness embedded in law and culture alike.. Culturally, masculine ideals such as emotional restraint, self-reliance, and breadwinner expectations create systemic barriers to help-seeking. Clichés like 'Boys don't cry' don't just reflect social attitudes—they encode emotional suppression into the cultural script of masculinity. This crisis demands simultaneous cultural destigmatization and legislative reforms to redefine mental healthcare accessibility. Culturally, interventions must confront toxic masculinity's promotion of risky behaviors and suppression of vulnerability As Foss notes, toxic masculinity discourages emotional openness by equating vulnerability with weakness, reinforcing mental health stigma among men.¹¹, emphasizing community-based education to reframe help-seeking as strength rather than weakness Foy emphasizes that culturally informed interventions can bridge the gap between men and mental health access, particularly in multicultural contexts. ¹²Trusted peer networks and male-centric outreach programs could counter stigma by normalizing emotional expression within safe

¹¹ Kevin Foss, *What is Toxic Masculinity and How it Impacts Mental Health*, <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/what-toxic-masculinity-and-how-it-impacts-mental>.

¹² Chris Foy, *Cultural Effects on Masculinity and Effects on Mental Health*, FHE Health (June 26, 2020), <https://fherehab.com/learning/multicultural-masculinity-mental-health>.

spaces¹³. Reforms to the system must span the legal and medical domains. Mental health training for judges and law enforcement can help dismantle biases that frame distressed men as dangerous rather than vulnerable—shifting the system from reaction to prevention. The important thing is that these legislative reforms must coincide with societal improvements, including as media campaigns that dispel stereotypes about "toughness," workplace rules that encourage emotional disclosure, and school curricula that teach healthy masculinity from an early age¹⁴. For males under pressure to be the only providers,

economic uncertainty increases the dangers to their mental health¹⁵, which is why mental health treatments must include financial counselling and job safeguards.

Progress demands a rethinking of legal foundations through the lens of constructed masculinities. This entails educating legal experts on how to identify gendered biases in evidence, testimony, and sentence; increasing access to mental health services catered to the special needs of males; and updating criteria such as the "reasonable person" test to account for a range of emotional expressions¹⁶. To ensure that new laws lessen rather than promote negative norms, legislative reforms might require gender impact evaluations. Such reforms include facing up to the unsettling realities of how the law upholds patriarchal systems, even when those systems injure the very men they are supposed to support. Accordingly, Judicial gender neutrality, far from ensuring fairness, often obscures systemic bias and reinforces patriarchal silence. The WHO recognizes that cultural constructions of masculinity deeply affect male help-seeking behaviour, necessitating reforms that engage men where they are—socially, culturally, and economically¹⁷.

¹³ Data, *Mental health, men and culture: how do sociocultural constructions of masculinities relate to men's mental health help-seeking behaviour in the WHO European Region?*, (July 5, 2020), <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/9789289055130>.

¹⁴ Kevin Foss, *What is Toxic Masculinity and How it Impacts Mental Health*, <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/what-toxic-masculinity-and-how-it-impacts-mental>.

¹⁵ *Traditional norms of masculinity*, European Institute for Gender Equality https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2021-report/traditional-norms-masculinity?language_content_entity=en.

¹⁶ Talkiatry Staff, *Men's mental health: Social norms and cultural stigma*, Talkiatry (Nov. 30, 2021), <https://www.talkiatry.com/blog/mens-mental-health-shame-vulnerability>.

¹⁷ *Mental health, men and culture: how do sociocultural constructions of masculinities relate to men's mental health help-seeking behaviour in the WHO European Region?*, <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/332974>

The law participates in a cycle of pain and silence by neglecting to examine how conventional masculinity influences behaviour and perception. Men are caught between institutional apathy and social expectations as the need to "be a man" clashes with the legal requirement for accountability. To end this pattern, vulnerability must be radicalized—not as a sign of weakness, but as the basis for a more just and compassionate judicial system. Silence does not always have deadly results. They are the result of structures that value power over equity, punishment over healing, and stoicism over compassion. In order to change these structures, we must first debunk the misconception that law and masculinity are two distinct domains, acknowledging instead their intertwined impact on both laws and lives. Only then will the legal system be able to effectively address the injustices caused by its own unquestioned standards, moving beyond neutrality.

"The silence around men's mental health is not cultural—it's systemic. And systems can be changed."

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION – REIMAGINING LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY

Recognizing masculinity as a social construct, not a biological inevitability, is the foundation for dismantling harmful norms. Social constructs are ideas or beliefs that are created and maintained by society, often through cultural practices, media representations, and social interactions. Masculinity, as a social construct, varies across cultures and time periods, demonstrating that it is not a fixed or universal concept. By recognizing the social construction of masculinity, we can begin to question the validity of traditional gender roles and expectations. We can challenge the notion that men must be strong, stoic, and self-reliant, and instead, promote a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of what it means to be a man. This involves embracing vulnerability, emotional expression, and the ability to seek help without shame. Education plays a critical role in deconstructing harmful notions of masculinity. Schools, community organizations, and media outlets can provide educational programs that challenge traditional gender stereotypes and promote healthy expressions of masculinity. These programs can help men and boys understand the importance of emotional intelligence, empathy, and

communication skills. They can cultivate safe spaces where men feel seen, heard, and supported in expressing emotional vulnerability.

Furthermore, role models who embody healthy expressions of masculinity can have a powerful impact. Seeing men who are successful, confident, and emotionally intelligent can inspire others to challenge traditional norms and embrace their own authentic selves. These role models can be athletes, artists, business leaders, or everyday individuals who demonstrate that it is possible to be strong and successful while also being vulnerable and compassionate.

Challenging the stigma surrounding mental health is also essential for deconstructing harmful notions of masculinity. Creating a culture where men feel safe and supported in seeking help for mental health issues requires a multi-faceted approach. This includes raising awareness about mental health conditions, reducing the stigma associated with seeking treatment, and promoting access to affordable and culturally sensitive mental health services.

Media portrayals of men and mental health can also play a significant role in challenging stigma. By amplifying the voices of men who have navigated mental health challenges, the media can help normalize the experience and encourage others to seek help. It is important to portray men as complex individuals with a range of emotions, rather than perpetuating stereotypes of stoic and emotionless figures.

In addition to challenging harmful norms, it is also important to celebrate the diversity of men's experiences. Recognizing that men come from different backgrounds, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses is crucial for creating a more inclusive and equitable society. This means acknowledging the unique challenges faced by men from marginalized communities, such as men of color, LGBTQ+ men, and men with disabilities. By deconstructing harmful notions of masculinity and embracing a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of what it means to be a man, we can create a society that is more supportive of men's mental health. This will not only benefit individual men but also strengthen families, communities, and society as a whole.

Within the legal system, this societal conditioning translates into a lack of awareness and understanding of men's mental health needs. Law enforcement officials, lawyers, and judges may be ill-equipped to recognize the signs of mental illness or to appreciate the impact of mental health on an individual's behavior. This can lead to misinterpretations of actions, harsher

punishments, and a general lack of empathy for men struggling with mental health issues within the legal system.

For example, a man experiencing severe depression may be arrested for public intoxication or petty theft. Instead of receiving a mental health evaluation and appropriate treatment, he may be incarcerated, further compounding his problems and perpetuating the cycle of mental illness and legal trouble. Similarly, a man with undiagnosed anxiety disorder may react aggressively in a stressful situation, leading to charges of assault. Without understanding the underlying mental health condition, the legal system may simply punish the behavior without addressing the root cause. The lack of adequate mental health services within the legal system also contributes to the problem. Many jails and prisons in India lack sufficient mental health professionals and resources to provide comprehensive care for inmates with mental health conditions. This can lead to inadequate treatment, neglect, and even abuse, further exacerbating the mental health problems of incarcerated men. Even when mental health services are available, they may not be culturally sensitive or tailored to the specific needs of men, rendering them less effective.

In essence, India's legal system often functions in isolation from psychological realities, overlooking the profound influence of mental health on human behavior. According to the WHO, mental health infrastructure in correctional facilities remains 'grossly under-resourced,' especially for men with undiagnosed disorders¹⁸. This oversight perpetuates a cycle of punishment and neglect, disproportionately affecting men who are already struggling with societal pressures and stigmas. Reimagining legal responsibility requires a fundamental shift in perspective, one that prioritizes mental health interventions and recognizes the need for a more compassionate and understanding approach to justice.

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¹⁸ WHO Regional Office for Europe (2020), *Mental health, men and culture*

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