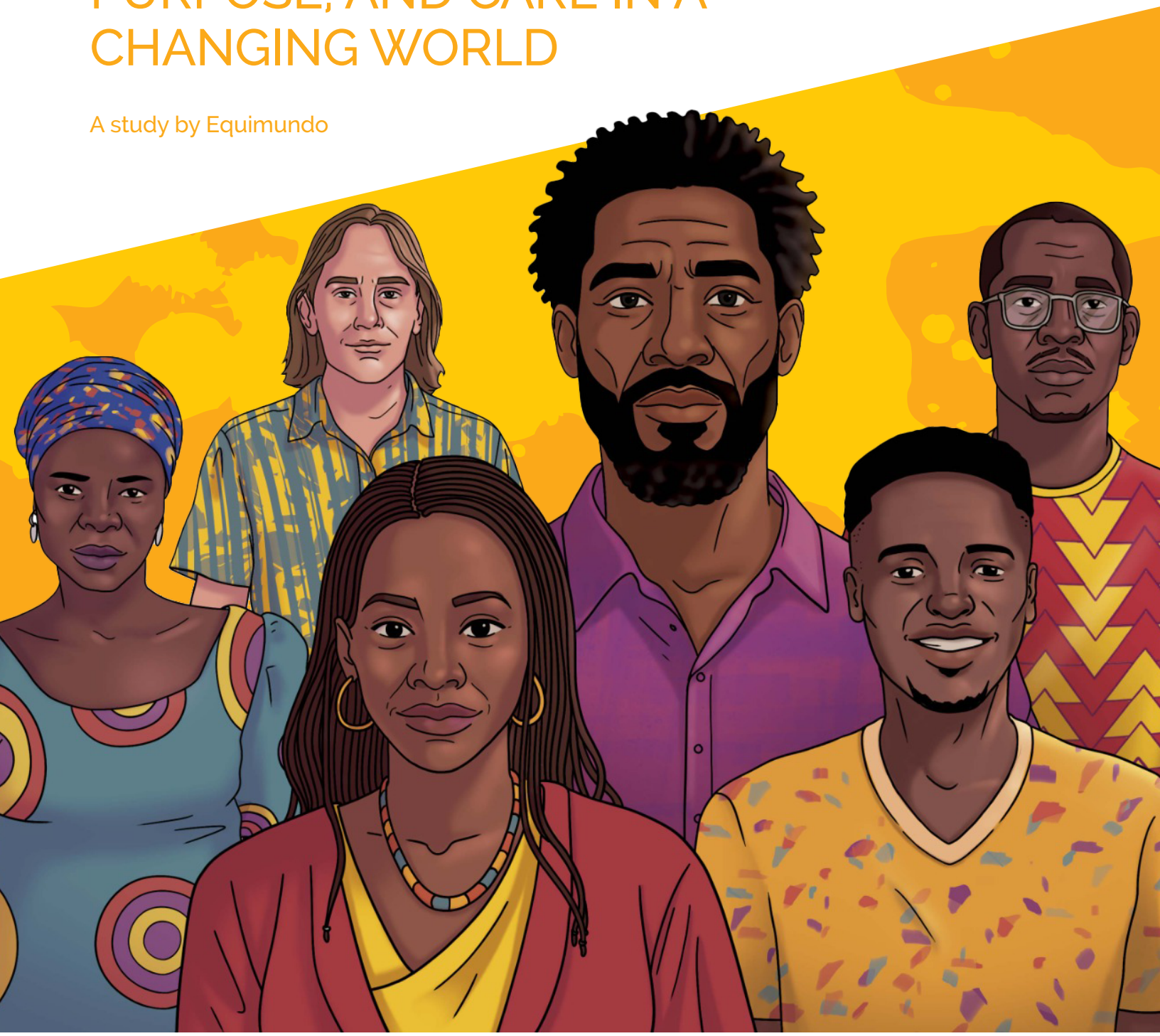
MASCULINITIES IN RWANDA, SOUTH AFRICA, AND UGANDA: CONNECTION, PURPOSE, AND CARE IN A CHANGING WORLD

A study by Equimundo



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ABOUT EQUIMUNDO

Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice has worked internationally and in the United States since 2011 to engage men and boys as allies in gender equality, promote healthy manhood, and prevent violence. Equimundo works to achieve gender equality and social justice by transforming intergenerational patterns of harm and promoting patterns of care, empathy, and accountability among boys and men throughout their lives. This study is part of the Generation Gender global partnership and Equimundo's research portfolio that works to strengthen evidence and build partnerships on healthy masculinities with researchers, practitioners, policymakers, media, philanthropy, sports, and the corporate sector. *Find out more about Equimundo.*

ABOUT GENERATION GENDER GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

Imagine a world where you can be who you want to be. A gender-just and violence-free world where everyone can live in their full diversity. It's possible. But it requires fundamental change. The Generation G partnership strives to do so. It equips youth leaders and civil society organizations to address the root causes of gender inequality and encourages sustainable change. The Generation G partnership places young people at the heart of the program: as catalysts for systemic change and as a key target group. Doing so we will achieve sustainable, inclusive, and stable societies. *Find out more about Generation Gender.*

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, young men are navigating changing gender norms and expectations, rising economic and political instability, and new opportunities to define themselves. From social media feeds to community organizing, from global policy debates to the quiet pressure of family obligations, masculinities are evolving.

In the United States, for example, disinformation from conservative forces is deliberately targeting men who feel left out of the benefits of gender equality and who may have genuine vulnerabilities – such as economic displacement, curtailed educational opportunities, and unmet mental health needs. These are pushing against conversations around the need for equitable, healthy versions of manhood, and online forums are playing a growing role in spreading these versions beyond the Global North.

The Generation Gender (Generation G) partnership, together with youth leaders, tackles gender inequality by building public support for gender justice, developing youth-inclusive policymaking and legislation, and strengthening civil society so it can fight for gender justice. This report contributes evidence from three Generation G partner countries – Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda – to help understand what factors are barriers to and supports for allyship to gender equality among younger men (ages 18 to 40). It specifically examines if ideas about manhood and gender equality influence men's perceptions of purpose in life, optimism, and political ideology, as well as investigates men's political engagement and the nature of their online lives. The report concludes by offering recommendations for advocacy, programming, and policy.

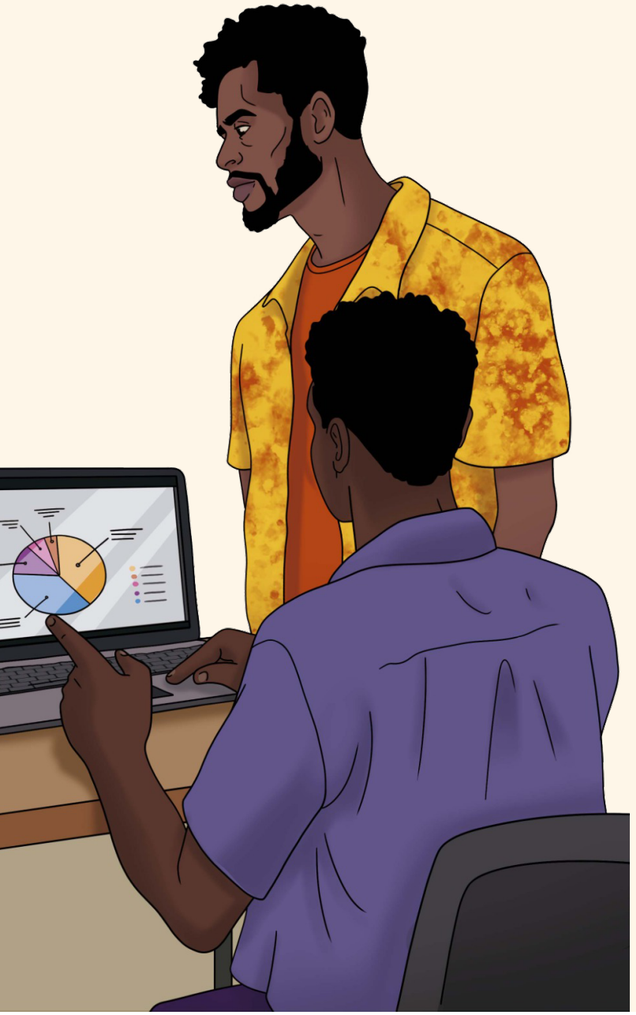
Literature shows that in Rwanda, even with progressive gender policies, care work remains feminized, and few young men report having role models who speak openly about connection or mental health. This reflects a broader trend in which caregiving and emotional literacy are still culturally coded as feminine, despite national efforts to promote gender equality (Rwanda Men's Resource Centre, 2019). Youth-focused prevention programming on gender-based violence, such as efforts led by Rwanda Men's Resource Centre and the Rwanda MenEngage Network, has made strides in promoting positive masculinities, but challenges persist in shifting everyday social norms. In South Africa, high rates of youth unemployment and urban violence contribute to a hypermasculine culture in which emotional repression is often seen as necessary for survival. In Uganda, cultural narratives tied to male strength and religious leadership continue to stigmatize emotional expression as weakness. Across all three countries, these realities shape how masculinities are lived and how they might be reimagined.

Our findings echo these overarching themes. They suggest that men define manhood through roles of control in relationships and financial provision, that ideas around emotional toughness and self-reliance continue to define manhood, and that a large proportion of the male respondents wish they were more masculine. But beneath these persistent norms is an undercurrent of tension between traditional expectations and the lived realities of economic hardship, shifting gender roles, and a desire for care, connection, and purpose. There is strong support for policy-driven systems that promote caregiving. Additionally, while a large majority worry about their own and their families' financial futures, they also believe that they will have a better family life, economic security, and job opportunities. Online spaces are deeply influential.

Importantly, across all three countries, masculinity is not fixed. It is being performed, tested, and redefined every day. This report captures that process. Men are not static or uniform in their beliefs. Many are trying to find new ways to relate to others, contribute to their families, and live with purpose. Young men aged 18 to 40 are negotiating these changes in complex and often contradictory ways. Many are still shaped by expectations of control, provision, and independence. Yet across all three countries, there are also signs of openness to care,

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The data presented in this report comes from an online questionnaire administered to 494 participants in Rwanda, 802 participants in South Africa, and 800 participants in Uganda.



connection, and gender equity.

The questionnaire drew on questions developed and tested by Equimundo and others used in large-scale surveys, with all informed by existing research on men (Barker et al., 2023). Rep Data, the partner responsible for data collection, recruited participants from various research panels and applied minimum quotas and maximum limits so that the sample closely matched the socioeconomic and ethnic demographic distribution of the actual population of each country. A quota was programmed to guarantee that 70 percent of the sample were men and 25 percent were women. Men were oversampled to draw a complex portrait of what it means to be a man in this region. The survey was open to all people aged 18 to 40. This captures the full range of "young adulthood" that includes progression into adulthood, career, and family formation among men. The survey was administered between November 2024 and February 2025, and data was analyzed in Stata.

The key indices and scales this study uses gauge purpose in life, optimism, attitudes about masculinity, gender threat, trust in political institutions, and the influence of online influencers. Attitudes about masculinity are measured using Equimundo's Man Box Scale, which captures men's adherence to a restrictive, dominance-driven view of manhood (Hill et al., 2020).

Table 1 shows that for all three countries, more than a third of the men have at least a college degree, and a large proportion are employed; many are engaged in caregiving. Figures 1 to 5 show that the regional and ethnic distribution of these countries is similar to the population. The background characteristics of the full sample (women and men) can be found in the appendix. Care needs to be taken while comparing the findings since the local context varies.

TABLE 1 | SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS AMONG MEN

	Rwanda (%) n=321	South Africa (%) n=370	Uganda (%) n=492
AGE			
18-23	23.1	27.8	26.8
24-30	39.3	35.4	38.2
31-40	37.7	36.8	35.0
EDUCATION			
Less than high school	11.5	0.3	5.7
High school	27.7	39.2	30.1
Vocational degree	22.7	19.2	29.7
Bachelor's degree	29.0	36.0	32.5
Master's degree	9.0	5.4	2.0
RELATIONSHIP STATUS*			
Single, looking for a partner	30.6	26.2	22.0
Single, not looking for a partner	17.4	17.2	21.6
In a relationship, not married	16.1	34.4	24.5
Married	34.1	21.1	31.0
EMPLOYMENT			
Employed	81.6	78.9	73.0
Partner has an income	62.3	76.4	74.5
Has children and/or cares for others	46.1	67.3	68.5
ECONOMIC STANDING			
Low/basic needs not mostly met	28.9	15.5	37.5
Middle	41.2	52.6	39.8
High/basic and important needs are always met	29.9	31.9	22.6

*Less than 2 percent said divorced/widowed/separated

FIGURE 1

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF MEN'S SAMPLE, RWANDA (n=321)

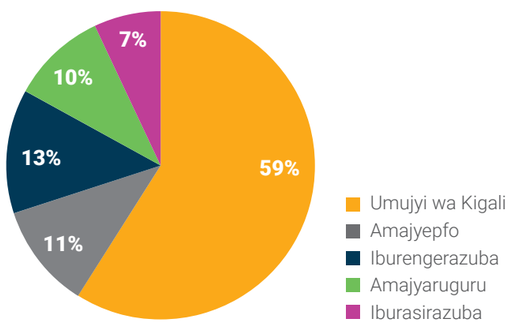


FIGURE 2

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF MEN'S SAMPLE, SOUTH AFRICA (n=370)

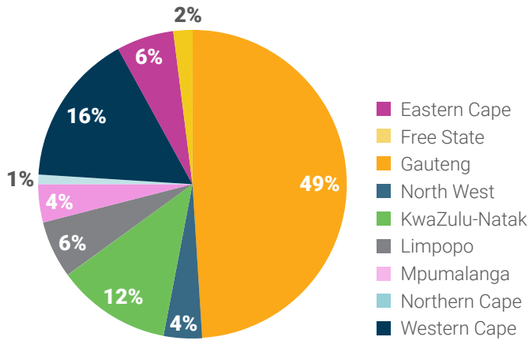


FIGURE 3

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF MEN'S SAMPLE, UGANDA (n=492)

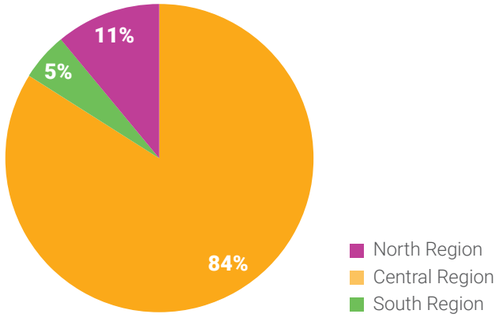


FIGURE 4

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION OF MEN'S SAMPLE, SOUTH AFRICA (n=370)

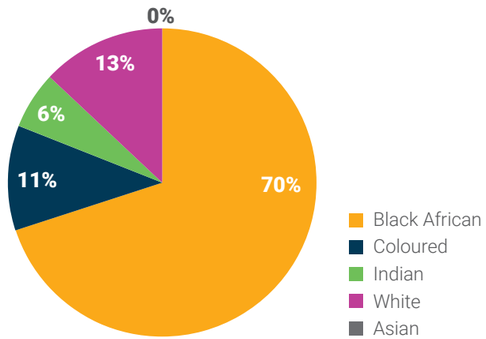
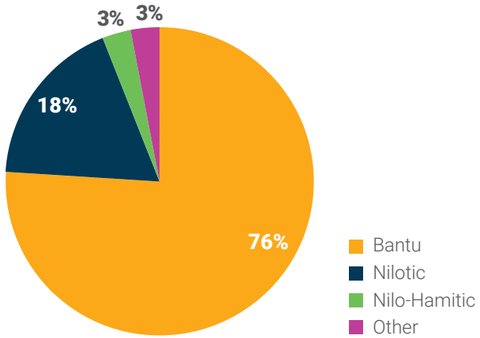


FIGURE 5

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION OF MEN'S SAMPLE, UGANDA (n=492)



MASCULINITIES TODAY: PROVIDERS, CARERS, AND PEOPLE SEEKING PURPOSE

Masculinity is defined by performance and control, but care is part of the story.

In all three countries, manhood is closely linked to control in relationships, financial provision, and social status.

About two-thirds of the men sampled endorse men's traditional role as the primary earner, though views vary by country. Further, more than half of men in each country believe men, not women, should be the main financial providers. Men in Uganda express the most traditional attitudes, with 62 to 69 percent believing women earning more than their husbands leads to conflict and that men make better business executives, compared to 45 to 46 percent of South African men and 58 to 61 percent of Rwandan men. A significantly larger proportion of men hold these views compared to women. Similarly, 60 to 74 percent of men agree that "successful men have families," underscoring the enduring association between masculinity and family leadership. These expectations reflect deep-seated norms around men's authority in the household, norms that for many are rooted in both control and care. These patterns mirror broader regional findings from research such as the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) in sub-Saharan Africa, which showed that men frequently frame control in relationships as care or protection (Barker et al., 2011).

In Uganda, 75 percent of men say they deserve to know where their partner is at all times, while the 67 percent in South Africa and 64 percent in Rwanda say the same, reflecting a model of masculinity built on entitlement and surveillance rather than mutuality (Gupta, et al. 2021). Additionally, 75 to 87 percent say a man should protect his family's honor by ensuring women are modest. Interestingly, though, only 32 percent of men

and 12 percent of women in South Africa believe a man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage. This suggests that **while power remains a feature of masculine expectations across contexts, norms around authority and decision-making may be slightly more negotiated or becoming more egalitarian at the individual level in South Africa.** These small cracks in traditional norms could offer important openings for shifting relationship dynamics over time.

The question of what constitutes a "real man" also helps understand what men think is an acceptable version of masculinity. For example, we find that 70 to 72 percent of men in Uganda and Rwanda say a gay man is not a "real man," compared to just 39 percent in South Africa. These distinctions highlight not only differing national conversations around masculinity but also potential entry points for locally grounded norm-shifting efforts.

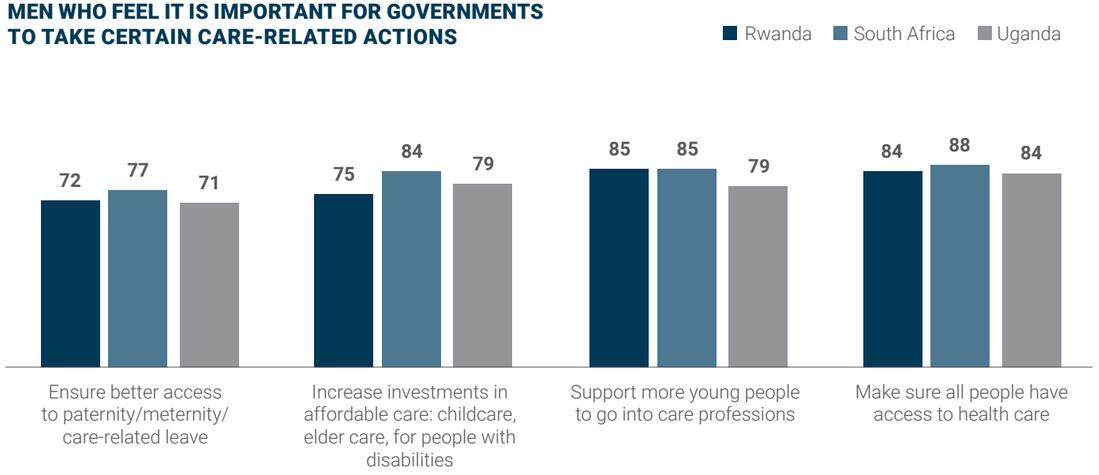
Yet contradictions persist. While South African men are less likely than their peers in Uganda and Rwanda to endorse rigid gender roles, many still feel pressure to embody traditional masculinity. Across the sample, **63 percent of men say they wish they were more masculine,** suggesting that internalized ideals of manhood – often equated with strength, control, and earning power – remain deeply influential even where social norms are evolving. The gaps between how men act, how they feel, and how they believe they should be shape both relationships and self-perception.

Overall, our findings in this area suggest that young men do not prioritize care when determining how they see themselves and that **as long as financial success remains the sole marker of men's worth, roles like caregiving, nurturing, and emotional support will be seen as second-tier.** But the desire is there – men are optimistic, they want stable families, and they're navigating new definitions of purpose even when the old definitions still dominate public life.

Perhaps related to this stress, **men value support for caregiving at the national level and greater investment in care systems:** 79 percent of men across the three countries believe their government should increase investments in affordable, quality care – including childcare, elder care, and care for people with disabilities/special needs. The data suggests that **while care is not absent from young men's sense of importance, caregiving remains peripheral in personal definitions of success, overshadowed by financial achievement.** At the global level, caregiving is increasingly recognized as a transformative space for male identity. *State of the World's Fathers 2023* underscores that men's increased interest in caregiving has not yet translated into structural support or normative permission; in many settings, men want to care, but care is still seen as "women's work," not something that confers masculine value (van der Gaag et al., 2023).

FIGURE 6

MEN WHO FEEL IT IS IMPORTANT FOR GOVERNMENTS TO TAKE CERTAIN CARE-RELATED ACTIONS



YOUNG MEN REMAIN OPTIMISTIC, EVEN AMID PRESSURE TO PROVIDE.

We find that men are deeply optimistic about their futures. While 79 percent worry about their own and their families' financial futures, the vast majority believe things will improve in the next decade (80 to 90 percent). **Across the three countries, 89 percent believe their family life will be better in 10 years, and 80 percent believe they will have better economic security and job opportunities.** This suggests a vision of manhood still shaped by aspiration, even as traditional roles become harder to fulfill. This aspiration remains central to how young men view their worth, although it appears to be less as a reflection of men's current opportunities and more of a necessary hope in the face of perceived limited options.

This contradiction between what men think they should attain and what they realistically can has emotional consequences. Studies show that when men internalize rigid norms but lack the resources to fulfill them, it leads to anger, disengagement, and backlash (Connell, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2011). In South Africa, for example, this has been linked to high rates of intimate partner violence and "provider stress" among unemployed youth (Sonke Gender Justice, 2020).

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY EXISTS ALONGSIDE PATRIARCHAL BELIEFS.

The data reveals tension: **nearly half of Rwandan and South African men (45 to 49 percent), and over half of Ugandan men (54 percent), say that men make better politicians than women.** These beliefs are not marginal; they reflect persistent, socially accepted ideas about leadership and gender. Yet paradoxically, **64 percent of men across the three countries support quotas to increase women's representation in politics.** These contradictions are not unique to the region.

This disconnect between belief and policy support is significant, suggesting that men may back gender reforms instrumentally ("it's good for stability") rather than from conviction. It may also point to an openness that reform campaigns can build on, even where attitudes lag. Support for gender equity often coexists with contradictory beliefs: the same men who believe women are less suited to politics may also believe women lack opportunities. This offers a critical **insight: young men are not immovable obstacles to gender justice.**

When care and emotional contribution are often treated as secondary or invisible in masculine identity, men seeking connection often find themselves without social permission to pursue it. Instead, traditional expectations continue to dominate, even where political progress has shifted the broader landscape. In Rwanda, for example, men have witnessed the rapid advancement of women's leadership, and the country now holds the highest percentage of women in parliament globally (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). However, **while two-thirds of Rwandan men support quotas for women in politics, nearly half still believe that men make better political leaders.** Hence, visible political gains have yet to translate into shifts in everyday norms.

MEN SEE FEMINISM AND GENDER EQUITY AS A ZERO-SUM GAME.

Globally, research shows that men often experience gender equity reforms as a zero-sum game, especially when their own status feels precarious (Barker et al., 2011; Connell, 2005). This narrative of "men are being left behind" has become increasingly mainstream in policy and media.

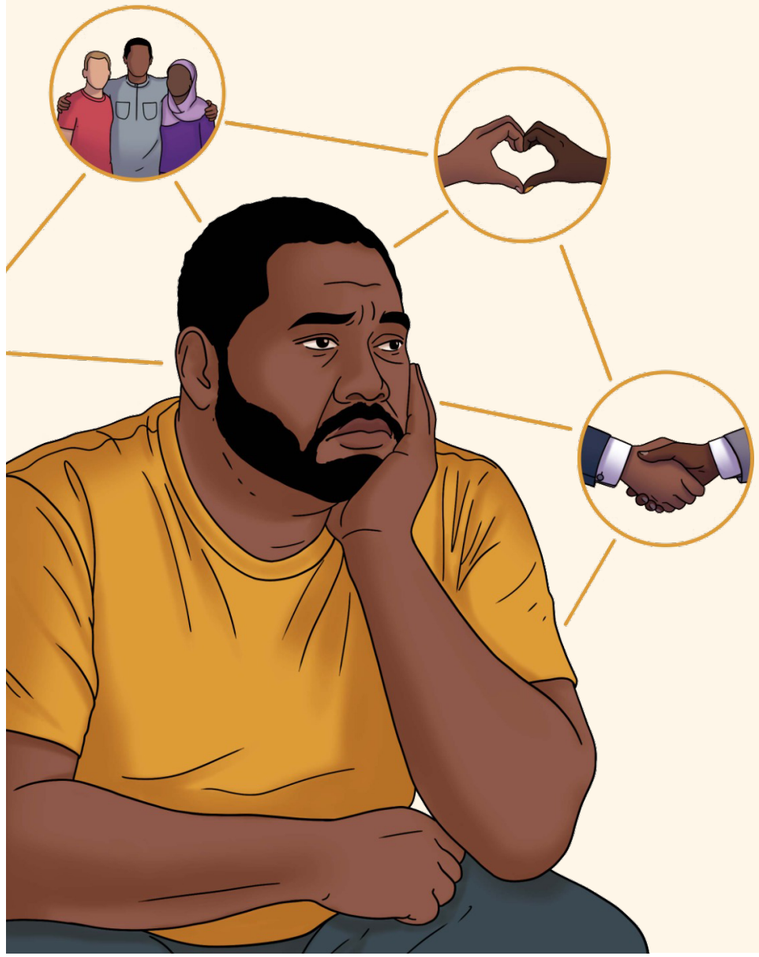
Across the three countries surveyed, men tend to sense a threat to manhood. For instance, 67 to 72 percent believe each of the following: "no one cares about men's issues today," "society as a whole says men are getting weaker," "feminism is about favoring women over men," and "men have it harder than women when it comes to

new opportunities." The difference between women and men varied significantly on these measures, with lower agreement among women. These findings point to a nuanced form of gender threat, where women's formal gains coexist with men's private anxieties about status, respect, and space. When caregiving and emotional contribution remain undervalued, and traditional markers of success grow harder to attain, the gap between aspiration and reality deepens. With this, the potential for backlash is visible in terms of both gender identity and gender threat.

The data also suggests a more grounded story: Men aren't opposing equity because they hate feminism. Rather, they're navigating fragile trust, frustrated expectations, and unclear futures, particularly in an economy and political landscape that often seems to have no space for them. What men believe about institutions and equity is shaped by how they feel about their future, and right now, **many are not only unsure of whether they should support gender justice but also unsure of whether "justice" includes them at all.**

MEN'S SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND EMOTIONAL LIVES

Across the three countries studied, young men are navigating their identities in environments where masculinity is both a shield and a trap.



They're told to be strong, reliable, and stoic, but they're also rarely safe enough to be honest, uncertain, or in need of connection.

SOME EMOTIONAL DISCONNECTION COEXISTS WITH OPTIMISM AND A SENSE OF PURPOSE.

Two-thirds of men across the three countries reported feeling emotionally close to someone in the past two weeks. This surprising contrast complicates narratives of men as emotionally disconnected. It may suggest that while men face significant pressures related to gender norms, they are also finding or prioritizing connection in ways that deserve further attention. Conversely, this also suggests that one in three men across the three countries do not feel emotionally close to anyone.

These findings add layers to our understanding of men's social connection. While men may express optimism about external outcomes such as job prospects

or marriage, they less consistently **feel a sense of social belonging and emotional agency.** In South Africa and Uganda, over 60 percent of men said in the past two weeks, they didn't feel like they could relate to most people. In Rwanda, by contrast, only 36 percent of men reported this feeling of disconnection. This may reflect Rwanda's strong national emphasis on unity and collective identity following the 1994 genocide, where social cohesion and community rebuilding have been actively promoted through programs such as Ndi Umunyarwanda ("I am Rwandan") and regular Umuganda (community service) days (Clark, 2010; Republic of Rwanda, 2022). Such initiatives may reinforce stronger communal ties even as individual pressures persist.

While national context clearly shapes how men feel in relating to others, broader patterns of masculine socialization cut across borders. **Over 75 percent of men in the three countries reported a sense of belonging in the past two weeks, yet only 52 percent allowed themselves to experience distressing emotions in the past month.** So, even where collective identity remains strong, norms about emotional toughness and self-reliance continue to define manhood. This highlights the tension between communal belonging and internalized emotional distance and suggests a lack of spaces to express vulnerability or seek support. This tension aligns with global scholarship on how masculine norms restrict emotional agency by emphasizing toughness, emotional detachment, and independence (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2004). The findings suggest that even in environments that outwardly promote unity, this "man box" teaches boys and men that needing help is weakness, that emotional closeness is feminine, and that to succeed as a man means to dominate, not to connect.

Programs across the continent are beginning to challenge this. Organizations like Sonke Gender Justice and the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre are investing in safe spaces where young men can talk about their feelings, care for others, and imagine alternative ways to be a man without being alone. This is evident in recent evaluations as well. For example, a randomized controlled trial of the Bandebereho project – which focused on small-group male engagement in Rwandan communities and led to substantial improvements in gender equity and health outcomes – assessed the long-term effectiveness of the Bandebereho pilot; it found strong statistical results and positive, sustained outcomes that were unusual because of the length of the trial (Doyle et al., 2018).

MEN WHO FEEL THEIR STATUS IS THREATENED ARE MORE LIKELY TO DISENGAGE OR PUSH BACK.

Using a 12-item scale to capture men's perceptions on whether manhood is being threatened or gender equity is a zero-sum game, our exploratory factor analysis found a single underlying factor based on six items: when men feel their status is threatened, they're more likely to disengage or push back (called 'gender threat' in this research). We conducted further analysis to understand if this underlying factor is associated with purpose in life, optimism, and political conservatism, as found in other contexts. Linear regression shows that **men who score high on gender threat are significantly more likely to report pessimism and emotional disconnection, and believing that men are at a loss is a warning sign of deeper insecurity and isolation.**

These widespread beliefs that "no one cares about men's issues today," "society as a whole says men are getting weaker," or "men have it harder than women when it comes to new opportunities" reflect more than simple resistance to change. They reveal how broader narratives of gender loss and perceived disadvantage shape men's internal sense of purpose, optimism, and belonging. These results mirror findings globally: when men experience economic or social displacement, they are more likely to respond by reinforcing control in personal relationships or resisting shifts toward gender equity (El Feki et al., 2017; Barker et al., 2011).

MASCULINITIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE: ONLINE LIVES AND GENDERED HARM

Across Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda, young men spend significant time online, shaping how they engage with identity, relationships, and masculinity.

With over 33 percent reporting six or more hours of daily internet use, digital platforms are not just spaces for entertainment; they are arenas where masculinity is performed, policed, and redefined. Evidence suggests that men actively turn to online spaces for community, connection, identity, and validation. However, certain forms of online cultures – that is, the **"manosphere"** – promote harmful forms of masculinity, such as those associated with dominance, surveillance, and emotional detachment (Barker et al., 2023). As more young men search for relationships, news sources, and even validation online, the platforms they rely on shape their perceptions of masculinity in ways that are often invisible but deeply consequential.

This is crucial information in today's context of online dating. Over 95 percent of men and women report that they have or would likely use a dating app or dating site in the future, and the data on their personal experience with online dating paints a picture that is both layered and revealing. In Rwanda, 73 percent of men and 60 percent of women indicate positive experiences with online dating compared to less than 50 percent of both groups in Uganda. While more research is needed, Rwanda's national emphasis on collective identity and social trust may help foster more positive online interactions compared to contexts where emotional connection is more heavily stigmatized.

THE ONLINE WORLD INFLUENCES DEEPLY PERSONAL ASPECTS OF LIFE.

Online spaces are deeply influential. **More than half of young men in Rwanda and Uganda say their online social life is more engaging and rewarding than their offline one** (**Table 2**), although only 30 percent of men in South Africa report this is so. Around 70 percent of men in Rwanda and Uganda say they follow influencers because these influencers make them think, make them feel better about themselves, and give them a sense of purpose; more than three-quarters say online content motivates them. Further, this space also shapes how men believe society works. The figures vary more in South Africa.

TABLE 2 | **MEN'S AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS**

	Rwanda (%) n=321	South Africa (%) n=370	Uganda (%) n=492
I often get my news from influencers rather than journalists.	51.1	37.0	54.5
I follow social media accounts because they give me advice on women and dating.	39.3	25.4	43.5
My online social life is more engaging and rewarding than my offline social life.	52.3	29.5	50.8
I often think that I should spend less time on my phone or online.	67.0	53.2	54.5
The internet allows me to connect with like-minded people I wouldn't meet otherwise.	66.0	65.1	72.6
The content I watch online motivates me.	75.1	77.8	80.9
I follow influencers because they make me think.	68.5	60.3	70.7
The content I watch online shares important views about how society works.	68.2	68.9	73.2
I follow influencers because they help me feel better about myself.	66.0	42.4	69.1
Listening to influencers on social media gives me a sense of purpose.	69.2	43.2	68.3

The data on online influencers is similarly layered. **Andrew Tate is among the most common figures named by young men in all three countries,** particularly in South Africa and Uganda. Tate's brand of wealth, control, and anti-feminism has spread rapidly across TikTok and YouTube, platforms where male vulnerability is rare and rage goes viral. His appeal lies in his promise: reclaim your masculinity by reclaiming control. His message taps into young men's fears of vulnerability being seen as weakness, reinforcing a model of masculinity built around emotional detachment and dominance.

But other influencers also appear. **Jay Shetty, David Goggins, Brené Brown,** and spiritual leaders show up frequently, alongside **local figures like BI Phakathi, Nomzamo Mbatha, and Lydia Jazmine.** These are voices that speak to care, emotional resilience, and justice. In Rwanda, we see spiritual leaders and teachers. In Uganda, Bobi Wine is mentioned for his activism. In South Africa, men named comedians and motivational speakers. **This diversity shows that men's digital lives are full of competing narratives, and not all of them are harmful.** Young men may admire resilience and purpose, but with a large proportion of men seeing the internet as allowing them to connect with like-minded people (reported by at least 65 percent), harmful beliefs could be amplified rather than challenged.

MEN, AND WOMEN, USE TECHNOLOGY TO EXERT CONTROL IN RELATIONSHIPS.

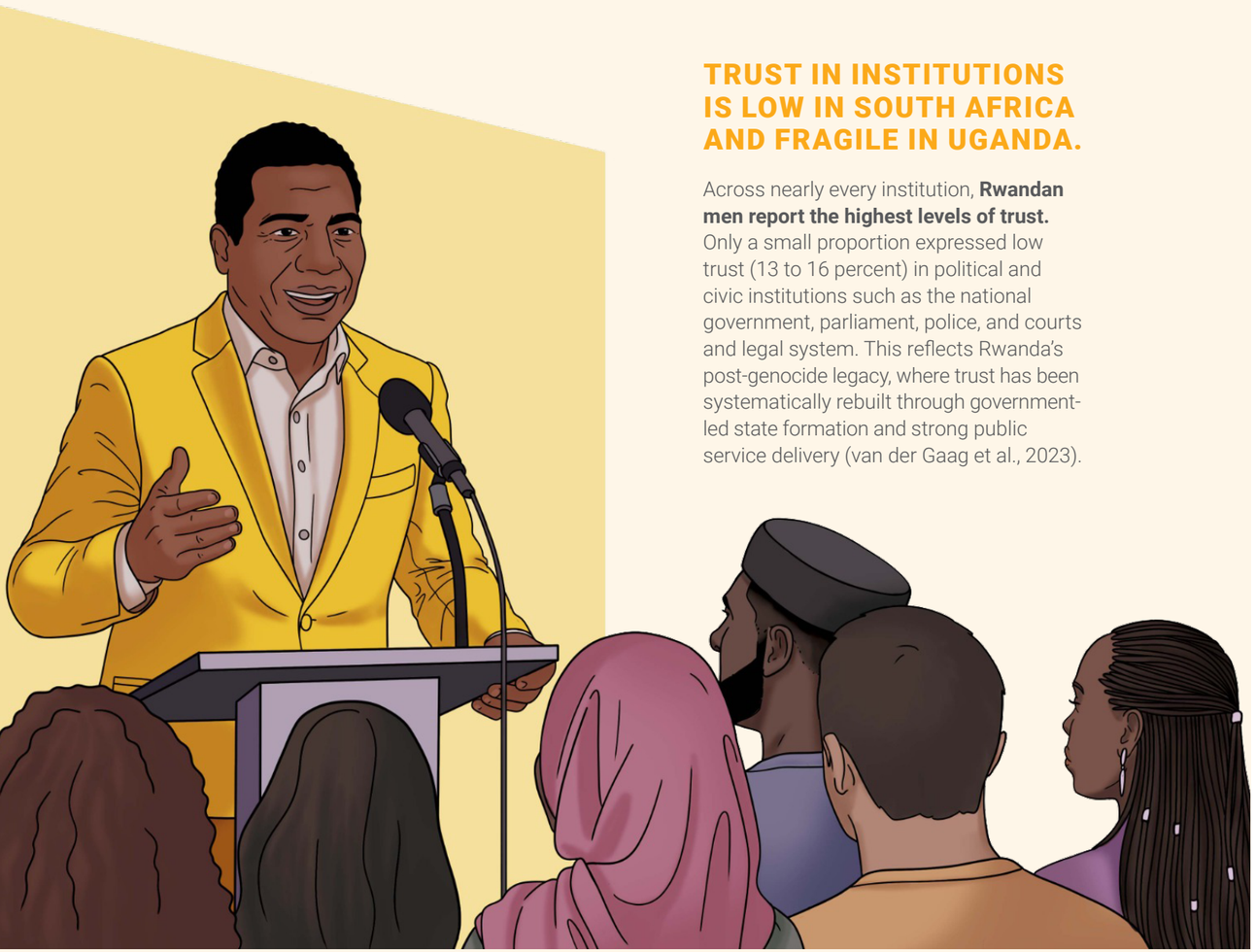
The data shows that **tech-facilitated violence is widespread among both young men and women,** both as a personal experience and as a behavior they admit to engaging in. For instance, around 20 to 28 percent of men in Rwanda said they experienced these forms of violence at least once to up to five times in the last year; 8 to 20 percent said it happened six or more times. The equivalent figures for women were 15 to 31 percent (at least once to up to five times) and 4 to 12 percent (six or more times). The figures are similar in South Africa and Uganda.

In terms of perpetration: Around 9 to 41 percent of men in South Africa report perpetrating these forms of violence at least one to up to five times in the last year, while 4 to 12 percent report perpetrating six or more times in the same period. The equivalent figures for women were 6 to 45 percent (at least once to up to five times) and 4 to 16 percent (six or more times). The figures are similar for Rwanda and Uganda.

Both men and women report their most frequently perpetrated acts of tech-facilitated violence are looking through one's phone without their permission, forcing someone to reveal their password to access their social media account, and checking on someone's location by getting them to send cell phone pictures of where they are. Notably, all these actions may be normalized and framed as protective or caring, but these are not minor acts. They reveal how digital control and coercion have become normalized in intimate relationships, often framed in popular culture as protective or romantic. Additionally, while these behaviors are not gender-exclusive, men report higher rates of both experience and perpetration. This points to a deeper narrative: masculinity is still often defined through surveillance, control, and emotional restraint.

MASCULINITIES, EQUITY, AND INSTITUTIONS

The data shows that institutional trust, civic engagement, and support for equity do not move together neatly. They overlap, diverge, and sometimes contradict each other.



TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS IS LOW IN SOUTH AFRICA AND FRAGILE IN UGANDA.

Across nearly every institution, **Rwandan men report the highest levels of trust.** Only a small proportion expressed low trust (13 to 16 percent) in political and civic institutions such as the national government, parliament, police, and courts and legal system. This reflects Rwanda's post-genocide legacy, where trust has been systematically rebuilt through government-led state formation and strong public service delivery (van der Gaag et al., 2023).

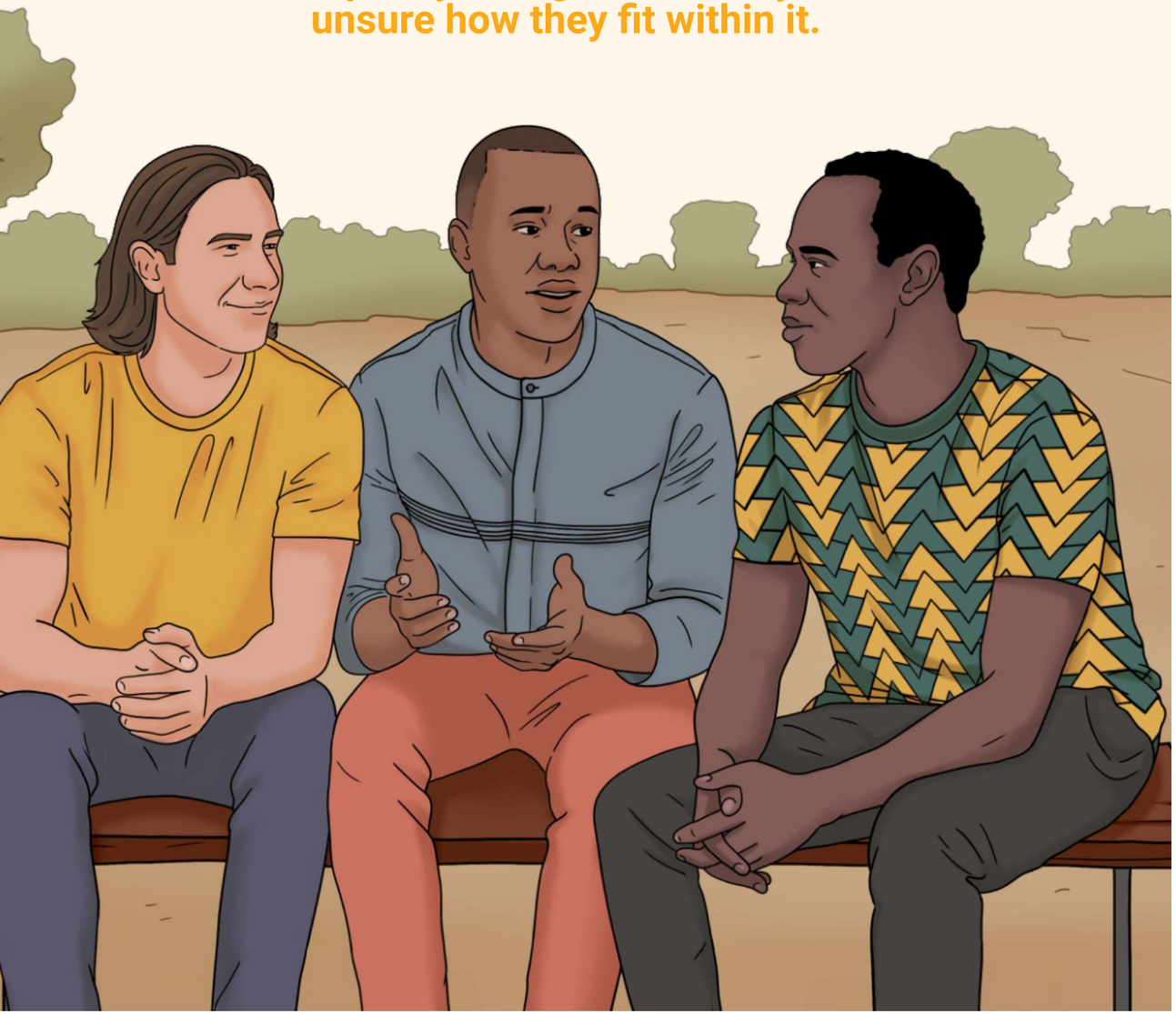
By contrast, **South African men show profound institutional cynicism. Over 77 percent distrust political parties, 72 percent distrust parliament, and 65 percent distrust the police,** mirroring widening economic gaps and struggles with fulfilling post-apartheid promises. **Ugandan men fall in between, with nearly half expressing low trust in both national and local government,** suggesting fatigue with state responsiveness amid an increasingly authoritarian civic space.

Still, trust doesn't always translate to disengagement. **Men in Rwanda and Uganda were more likely than South African men to have attended a local political meeting or volunteered for a political candidate.** Notably, 62 percent of Ugandan men and 59 percent of South African men say they've worked with others to solve a problem in their community. This suggests that even when formal trust is low, **peer-based civic action remains active,** particularly in places where institutional gaps are most deeply felt. For many men, acting locally becomes a way to claim agency when broader systems feel inaccessible or unresponsive.

Ideologically, most young men identify as moderate (44 percent); only around one in four identify as conservative, and about a third as liberal. Rwandan men are the most likely to see themselves as liberal (49 percent), while South African and Ugandan men are the most moderate (55 percent and 45 percent, respectively). This orientation suggests that men are not necessarily anchored in rigid ideology. Instead, they may be searching for approaches that feel practical and fair, especially in political landscapes where formal trust is fragile. For norm-shifting efforts, this signals an opportunity: engaging men through values like dignity, fairness, and opportunity may resonate more than framing change through partisan terms. The linear and logistic regressions show that men who adhere to restrictive views about masculinities (i.e., the "Man Box") or see manhood as being under threat are significantly more likely to side with political conservatism.

CONCLUSION: WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ACTION

Young men are not rejecting gender equality outright, but many are unsure how they fit within it.



They carry forward strong expectations to provide and lead, yet quietly express a desire for connection, care, and purpose. Many want to care for others but do not view caregiving as part of being a man. And while a majority support women's political participation, nearly half still believe men make better leaders. These contradictions are not signs of indifference. In digital spaces, men are bombarded with content that rewards control over connection. They follow influencers who promote domination, but also those who speak to vulnerability and growth.

Structural pressure must be addressed.

In South Africa, we found widespread distrust in political institutions coincides with strong expressions of gender threat and emotional isolation. In Uganda, political skepticism coexists with high levels of community engagement. These findings suggest that policy cannot ignore the social contract. Without economic opportunity, civic voice, or basic trust in institutions, calls for norm change will fall flat. Real transformation depends on real inclusion. Studies from Sonke Gender Justice's One Man Can campaign reinforce this: sustainable gender norm change is most effective when it's embedded in broader strategies for social inclusion. Programs that pair individual reflection with community mobilization and advocacy are impactful.

That means equity work cannot rely only on moral arguments. It must:

- Address men's trust gaps, not just call men out for their attitudes.
- Connect civic participation to shared goals rather than institutional loyalty.
- Use peer narratives to normalize gender equity, especially in local and online spaces.

These are not just policy levers – they are pathways to rebuilding trust and helping young men see themselves as part of a shared future.

Digital environments must be taken seriously.

This report shows that men are actively following figures like Andrew Tate but also ones like Jay Shetty and Brené Brown. Content that glorifies control spreads quickly, but it is not the only thing young men are drawn to. What gains traction are voices that speak to pain, pressure, and possibility.

To support healthier masculinities online, we must:

- Promote male-led digital storytelling that centers care and emotional resilience.
- Regulate platforms that normalize coercion and control.
- Invest in community influencers who model alternative forms of masculinity.

Digital spaces shape young men's understanding of identity and power. Regulation matters – but so does amplifying content that shows men they have more to gain than to lose.

Care must be reframed as aspiration.

While many men want to contribute to their families and communities, they do not always see caregiving as aligned with masculinity. Messaging that frames care as courage, presence, and purpose can begin to shift this. But this requires more than narrative. It demands investment in youth-centered care infrastructure: services, resources, and systems that make caregiving roles real, visible, and supported.

To shift this perception, we should:

- Launch campaigns that portray caregiving as strength, highlighting real men as nurturers, teachers, and caregivers in their communities.
- Invest in youth-centered care infrastructure (e.g., early childhood education, disability care, and elder support) that offers visible, supported roles for young men.

Peer connection is a critical driver of change.

The data shows that men who feel supported and less threatened in their gender identity are more likely to be hopeful and less likely to engage in controlling behavior. That change happens most often through dialogue and relationships. Investing in small, community-led peer groups creates space to reflect, question, and reimagine masculinity from within.

To activate this, we should:

- Support small, community-led peer groups that allow men to question and redefine masculinity in safe, nonjudgmental spaces.
- Equip youth leaders and mentors with training on gender, care, and emotional well-being to foster

inclusive peer environments, building on models like Generation G that engage young people as agents of change in norm transformation.

Mental health is a powerful entry point.

While mental health was not a primary focus of this study, emotional well-being emerged consistently as a theme in the data. Across all three countries, men reporting low emotional connection were also less optimistic, less purposeful, and more likely to reinforce harmful gender norms. Interventions that begin with emotional well-being – through mentorship, creative expression, or culturally grounded healing practices – can open up space for deeper conversations about care, equity, and change.

To harness this entry point, we must:

- Integrate mental health supports into youth and gender programming, including culturally grounded approaches to healing and expression.
- Use creative arts, sports, and faith-based dialogue as vehicles to open conversations about purpose, identity, and emotional resilience.

Masculinity is not fixed. It is tested, negotiated, and redefined every day. Across themes of care, control, optimism, trust, and harm, this report has shown that many young men are already moving. They are not waiting for permission to change. They are looking for better answers. Now is the time to make sure they can find them.

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APPENDIX, SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

All figures are percentages unless noted otherwise.

Sample	Rwanda	South Africa	Uganda
GENDER*			
Women (n)	172	423	301
Women (%)	34.9	53.3	38.0
Men (n)	321	370	492
Men (%)	65.1	46.7	62.0
Total (n)	***493***	***793***	***793***
	*1 said other	*9 said other	*7 said other
AGE			
18-23	21.5	24.8	29.3
24-30	42.3	37.5	38.3
31-40	36.2	37.7	32.5
EDUCATION			
Less than high school	10.9	0.3	5.1
High school	29.2	35.2	30.8
Vocational degree	26.5	18.1	26.5
Bachelor's degree	26.9	40.7	35.0
Master's degree	6.5	5.9	2.6
RELATIONSHIP STATUS*			
Single, looking for a partner	33.3	21.1	22.5
Single, not looking for a partner	16.6	16.8	23.9
In a relationship, not married	18.4	35.4	26.9
Married	30.5	25.3	25.3
Divorced/widowed/separated	1.2	1.4	1.4
CAREGIVER STATUS			
Not a caregiver	55.1	26.1	32.8
Has children and/or cares for others	44.9	73.9	67.3
ECONOMIC STANDING			
Low/basic needs not mostly met	23.3	15.0	34.1
Middle	48.4	50.2	40.2
High/basic and important needs are always met	28.3	34.8	25.7

Sample	Rwanda	South Africa	Uganda
DOES PARTNER HAVE AN INCOME?			
Women	76.3	85.8	84.2
Men	62.3	76.4	74.5
EMPLOYMENT STATUS			
Unemployed			
Women	9.3	16.1	19.6
Men	9.0	10.5	14.0
Employed			
Women	77.3	73.5	64.1
Men	81.6	78.9	73.0
In school, not employed			
Women	13.4	9.7	14.0
Men	8.7	8.4	12.0
Other			
Women	0.0	0.7	2.3
Men	0.6	2.2	1.0

GENERATION for gender justice

GENERATION