

Exploring hegemonic masculinity among immigrant men

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Abstract: Hegemonic masculinity is dignified in our patriarchal society even though there are multiple sets of masculinities, which eventually conceal and ignore lived masculinities. While certain structures continue to reinforce the privileging of men, they simultaneously intensify the vulnerability of victimized men and destabilize the traditional ideal of hegemonic masculinity. In this context, patriarchal systems tend to overlook the vulnerabilities of these men, offering little recognition or support. At the same time, such systems can further marginalize immigrant men, increasing precariousness, deepening their exposure to social and economic insecurity by stigmatizing them.

1. Introduction

Masculinity is not a fixed trait but a socially constructed, fluid and multiple set of practices (Connell 1985). Adolescence is widely seen as a crucial stage in the development and formation of diverse forms of masculinity (Gavray & Govers 2025). In Bangladeshi society, men are anticipated to be masculine enough as breadwinner (Hasan et al. 2017), reflecting hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) as this is the most honored way of being a man (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Because, "androcentric ideology" (a focus on male-defined values) shapes social life (Herzfeld 1985). According to (Connell 1995), hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally dominant and idealized version of masculinity that upholds and justifies patriarchal authority. Rather than simply describing a personality type, it represents a pattern of gendered practices that functions mainly through social approval and consent, rather than relying solely on coercion (Connell 1995). Although Gutmann (1997) argues against a single "macho" stereotype, emphasizing instead that masculinity is plural and often contested. Naguib (2015) correspondingly explains "lived masculinities," focusing on how male identities are negotiated within daily life and social relationships. Besides, Connell (1995) examines ideas of masculinity by considering how gender relations intersect with class structures. This perspective is clearly reflected in the hierarchical dynamics between hegemonic and marginalized forms of masculinity that she identifies. Apparently, the migrant men of Bangladeshi society position in between hegemonic masculinity and marginalized forms of masculinity. Migration is often driven by economic necessity, with many migrants seeking employment opportunities while leaving their families in their home country (Brichall 2016). This migration is largely shaped by structural push factors such as poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, as well as environmental pressures like natural disasters and climate change. In addition, broader socio-economic conditions further intensify the need for migration (Kibria 2011). Nonetheless, the marginalized position of immigrant men can destabilize conventional ideals of masculinity, often rendering them vulnerable both within the household and in the broader social context (Khan 2021) by

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leaving them precariat (Standing 2011). This occurs because dominant notions of male authority are undermined when significant numbers of men occupy marginal positions within a society, thereby challenging established structures of masculine power (Ratele 2014). This damages their social identity and leads to their exclusion, in some form, from the wider social group which drags them to stigma (Goffman 1963). Goffman (1963) describes stigma as a “deeply discrediting” characteristic that transforms a person from a “normal and complete” individual into someone viewed as flawed or diminished. He explains stigma as a social process in which people are denied full social acceptance because others perceive them as different. The concept of “vulnerability” and stigma are often linked primarily with women. Numerous reports highlight the vulnerabilities of women who travelled to the Middle East as domestic workers and later returned experiencing rape, torture, or even death (Donaldson & Howson, 2009). In contrast, the vulnerabilities of immigrant men and men more broadly are rarely made public or openly discussed, unlike the experiences of female migrant workers either abroad or in host countries (Donaldson & Howson, 2009). To maintain the masculine character of society, patriarchal systems often conceal or discourage men from expressing their sensitivities. As a result, unspoken social norms and stigma exist that prevent men from revealing their vulnerabilities.

This paper is based on a research project funded by the Jahangirnagar University for the 2024–2025 financial year. It begins by outlining the theoretical foundations of the study, followed by a description of the research methodology. The subsequent section examines the relationship between migration and the disruption of traditional forms of masculinity. The final two sections explore the gendered dimensions of male vulnerability and the structural factors that contribute to these vulnerabilities.

1. Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Research have accomplished on Bangladeshi immigrant women’s vulnerabilities at home, in abroad, and after returning home, but immigrant men’s vulnerabilities are being ignored mostly. The echo of patriarchal society is represented through research as well where patriarchy glorifies masculinity and hides their vulnerability and stigma. Several studies have examined the vulnerability of Bangladeshi immigrant men, their international labor migration from a gendered perspective, the psychosocial consequences, reintegration challenges, and structural impediments. A few research have inquired the migration of Bangladeshi men as a gendered process, explained masculinity as closely connected to economic system. Siddiqui (2005) and Gardner (2012) have explained that labor migration is often thought as a way out to fulfill expectations of male success, responsibility, and authority within the family. Thus, migration becomes a passage to respected manhood to society. However, these masculine roles are unsettled when migrant workers go through exploitation abroad or after returning to their host country.

Thus, masculinity is closely connected with every step of the lives of the immigrant men. Connell (1995) argues that masculinity should not be understood as a fixed biological characteristic rather, it is a set of socially constructed practices shaped by power relations. Connell (1995) is widely known for introducing the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which describes the culturally dominant model of manhood that sustains men’s authority

over women and marginalizes alternative or subordinated forms of masculinity. Besides Herzfeld (1985) offers a detailed semiotic analysis of the formation of masculine identity. His work explores how gender, particularly masculinity is constructed through social practices such as sheep stealing, hospitality, feuding, and naming. Herzfeld (1985) shows that Cretan men employ both language and everyday actions as ways to express and negotiate “androcentric ideology”. Gutmann (1997) as well challenged monolithic views, defining masculinity based on what men do to be men and highlighting its variations. His work argues against a single “macho” stereotype, emphasizing instead that masculinity is plural and often contested. Correspondingly, Naguib (2015) highlights a softer dimension of Egyptian masculinity that is connected to caregiving and social responsibility which she called “lived masculinities”.

Even though the migrant men have “live masculinities but still Connell (2005) and Silvey (2006) argue that they are not resistant to vulnerability. Besides, they experience a different kind of distress created by hegemonic patriarchal norms, duties, and silence. This helps to understand how gender functions to drive the immigrant men more vulnerable through patriarchal ideologies. Even though outward migration from Bangladesh has been extensively studied, but we lack in literature on the vulnerability and stigmatization of migrants and returnee men. Rahman (2011) explains the process of reintegration is challenging for the immigrant men, particularly when return is compelled. The precarity (Standing 2011) pull them into several kinds of difficulties. These include debt burdens, lack of employment, family crisis, and social stigma (Rahman 2011). According to Goffman (1963), stigma refers to a “spoiled identity”. It involves a physical flaw or a metaphorical mark on a person’s character that makes them appear less than normal. Goffman (1963) calls the members of this larger group “normals,” meaning people who do not possess the stigmatizing trait. In contrast, those who carry this mark are viewed as the stigmatized. Vulnerable migrant and returnee migrant men are considered as abnormal by the society. Black & Gent (2006) prioritize that reintegration should be multi-dimensional, including economic, social, and psychosocial domains, not merely as the physical or economical. They also suggest for structural support, access to social networks, and the availability of targeted interventions for successful reintegration. Research by Hossain & Kelly (2017) explain that Bangladeshi male migrants suffer from depression, anxiety, and trauma, both abroad and after return. Furthermore, NGOs report from BRAC and Caritas have documented alarming rates of suicidal tendency, substance abuse, and emotional distress among immigrant returnees, especially who returned after failed migration attempts or deportation. Nonetheless, psychological wellbeing of immigrant men remains undiscovered in Bangladesh. Unable to find suitable employment following their skills earned abroad is another source of their vulnerability (Khatri 2020). Government has no policy or program to incorporate the returnee immigrant and use their skill in rural areas so far. Furthermore, poor governance, weak legal protections, and inadequate financial inclusion related structural inequalities accelerate the vulnerabilities of immigrant men after returning home country. The Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) has some projects to reintegrate the returnee migrant, such as the Wage Earners’ Welfare Board (WEWB) and the Probashi Kallyan Bank. But most of the rural migrants have not heard of these because of their limited scope, poor monitoring and lack of circulation. Hence, Abrar & Sultana (2021) argue for a more holistic, rights-based

“Exploring hegemonic masculinity among immigrant men.”

reintegration approach, including mental health, gender, and community development to make those more fruitful.

Despite increasing academic and policy interest regarding migration and migrant, there remains a significant gap in those research. The research lack in gender-sensitive lens to understand specific vulnerabilities and stigmatization of male migrants and returnee migrants. Most of the research does not focus on psychological and emotional wellbeing by going beyond economic aspects. Correspondingly, the research fails to explore vulnerability of immigrant men as an intersection of masculinity, migration, migration failure, and family dynamics simultaneously. The paper examines these gaps through the experiences of Bangladeshi immigrant men, including the returnee migrants. Hiding or overlooking immigrant men's vulnerability and stigma is detrimental in general as it supports the glorification of masculinity and accelerate their vulnerabilities. When news, media, books and articles remain silent regarding their vulnerabilities, they are stigmatized and embarrassed to share their vulnerabilities as men. Because patriarchal society has made it taboo to become weak and vulnerable for men. This can further accelerate their vulnerability. Suicidal tendency among vulnerable men who do not receive any support to recover from the vulnerability is not unheard of. These circumstances extend the rationality of the research and timeliness to inquire immigrant men's vulnerabilities through exploring hegemonic masculinity.

2. Methodology of the study

The research was conducted in Sarishabari sub-district of Jamalapur District, Bangladesh. There are a number of men in the area who have migrated in many countries of Middle East, such as Saudi Arab, United Arab Amirat, Lebanon, Qatar, Oman. Few of them have migrated in South Africa, and Malaysia as well. Hence, there are hundreds of untold stories of immigrant men's vulnerability here and there. Some of them have faced fraudulent while investing to a business. Sometimes they have gone through financial exploitation by the close family members after going abroad. Often, they have been treated poorly after returning for crucial reasons or simply their wish. Occasionally incidents are heard from the neighbors or relatives but remain ignored. Even though these incidents should be analyzed with priority. For that, this area is relevant for the research and to explore immigrant men's vulnerability through the inquiry of hegemonic masculinity.

Qualitative research methods were used to collect in depth information about their situation, diversified experience, societal perception, psychology, and social ideology through this method. Secondary data sources as well, including national and international journal papers, books, newspapers, and web pages were used to understand the pattern of their vulnerabilities, along with perspectives of their relatives. Fifteen unstructured In-depth-interviews, and 3 Key Informant Interviews have been conducted as well including the agency members who send them abroad. Case study method was used to learn more deeply about an incident of immigrant men's vulnerability. Observation method was applied in overall fieldwork to gather information through observing their gesture, mood of talking etc. One FGD (Focus Group Discussion) was conducted in addition to collect more information within a short period of time with crosscheck.

3. Migration and the Disruption of Traditional Masculinity

The scope of formal domestic employment is insubstantial in Bangladesh, like many other developing countries (Farole et al. 2017). As a result, many workers migrate to higher income generating countries expecting higher paying employment opportunities. Bangladesh ranked 5th worldwide in the number of citizens overseas, with an estimated 7.8 million people in 2018 (Ahmed & Bossavie 2022). Emigration incidence is also high, as about 15 percent or one in seven of the total working age male population is currently or was in the past employed overseas as of 2018. Besides, more than 750,000 workers have emigrated annually (pre-COVID), and the outflows have risen over time with increasing labor demand in these destinations over the last two decades. Emigration from Bangladesh is largely male dominated. According to the administrative data from the Bangladesh, Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), women represent only 4 percent of temporary migrants from Bangladesh. Migration from Bangladesh is highly concentrated in two destination regions and a few destination countries within them over 90 percent of migrants from Bangladesh go to either the oil exporting countries of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or Southeast Asia. According to both the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) and the Bangladesh Return Migrant Survey (BRMS). The top five destination countries in the BRMS sample are Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Malaysia, and Qatar, which together account for 83 percent of returning temporary migrants (Bossaviea et al. 2023).

Table 1: Characteristics of return migrants in Bangladesh by past destination

	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Oman	Malaysia	Qatar	Others	Total
Age at departure	29.4	27.6	29.8	27.8	28.9	28.9	28.7
Departure at age<25	31.5%	36.8%	29.9%	36.1%	31.0%	30.2%	32.9%
Years of education	6.6	6.5	5.9	6.4	6.9	7.0	6.5
Education: Primary and below	40.2%	40.8%	47.0%	40.4%	36.0%	36.1%	40.4%
Unexpected return	21.8%	22.3%	30.4%	21.4%	33.0%	25.4%	24.4%
Duration: less than 5 years	31.7%	47.5%	69.6%	41.3%	79.9%	62.3%	50.4%
Duration: 5-10 years	20.3%	36.7%	23.9%	29.6%	14.2%	21.1%	25.7%
Duration: 10+ years	47.9%	15.8%	6.4%	29.1%	5.9%	16.6%	23.9%
Duration	9.9	6.3	4.3	6.9	3.7	5.5	6.7
Annual wage abroad (2010\$)	5,321	4,497	7,164	4,801	3,743	6,129	5,355
Migration cost (2010\$)	4,873	4,092	3,519	3,645	3,893	4,612	4,218
Self-employed after return	72.9%	63.9%	58.6%	65.7%	57.7%	68.0%	66.0%
Share in the sample	24.9%	23.3%	14.3%	14.1%	6.3%	17.1%	100%

Note: The sample is restricted to men 18-59 years old.

Source: Data on return migrants are from the Bangladesh Return Migrant Survey (BRMS) 2018/19.

Source: Bossaviea et al. (2023)

The majority of Bangladeshi male migrants originate from rural or peri-urban areas, often driven by poverty, unemployment, and limited local opportunities (Bossaviea et al. 2023). Male migrants from the study area have similar characteristics. Key characteristics include:

- Age: Mostly between 18 and 45 years old.
- Education: A significant proportion have low levels of formal education, many have not completed secondary school.

“Exploring hegemonic masculinity among immigrant men.”

- **Marital Status:** Most are married at the time of migration, often with dependents such as parents, spouses, and children.
- **Household Role:** These men typically serve as the primary income earners, bearing responsibility for extended family.

Their decision to migrate is usually a collective household strategy to fight poverty, pay off debts, house construction, children's education, or land acquisition etc. Mostly the migrant men are employed in low-skilled, labor-intensive sectors such as construction, manufacturing, cleaning and maintenance, agriculture, and transportation and logistics.

Despite hard labor and long working hours, wages are typically low compared to international standards. Furthermore, many workers face wage deprivation, contract substitution, and poor living conditions, the lack of job security and legal protections significantly undermines their overall wellbeing. Halim Ali (45) worked in Saudi Arab as a construction labourer for 15 years and came back intending to start a business here for livelihood. According to him, “The migrant life looks beautiful only from home country but there is no security, no luxury, no life for a migrant labourer in abroad”. Frustration and vulnerabilities of a migrant labourer abroad is understandable from his narrative. Forhad Hossain (40) also worked in Oman for 10 years and shared similar experience. According to him, “If you are a worker in abroad, you just work, you don’t really live there”. That explains the overall life of migrant workers. On the other hand, Migration profoundly shapes the identities of migrant men. Fazlur Rahman (35) working for an oil company in Saudi Arab for 10 years and came to visit his family. He shared, “My family members recall me when they need money or help to go to Saudi. Family members want me to be a worker for my whole life and pay them whenever they need”. His story presents the family expectation from a migrant worker, expecting sacrifice and compromise for his family wellbeing without thinking about him. Their identity is constructed through endurance, sacrifice, and responsibility. Nonetheless, their social status at home is interlinked with the success of their migration, often measured in remittances, house construction, or lifestyle improvements. Their families cherish high expectations from the migrant men. Many hope for financial stability, improved social status, quality education for children, buying land or build a house for them. These aspirations often become psychological pressure, especially if the returnee migrants fail to meet family or community expectations.

4. Gendered Dimensions of Male Vulnerability

Gendered analyses of migration mostly focus on the challenges faced by migrant women, but gendered experiences of migrant men remain marginalized (Charsley & Wray 2015). But it is equally essential to examine how gender norms affect migrant men and drag them to vulnerabilities through celebrating hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). Bangladeshi male migrant workers are expected to be masculine, breadwinners, productive and responsible to fulfill all the family responsibilities (Hasan et al. 2017). These social expectations to be “the men of the family” force them to their migration decisions, along with their experiences of vulnerability before, during, and after their return to home country. Even though Naguib (2015) explored the responsible nature of lived masculinities

but that does not leave the vulnerabilities of male migrants in Bangladeshi society contribute.

In Bangladeshi society, masculinity is interlinked to the role of provider and protector. Men have social pressure to become successful, emotionally strong, and socially dominant. That social pressure and expectation force the male migrant to spend their life as a worker abroad, providing for the family, paying their debt, sacrificing their lives for the family. Jobbar Hawladar (55) has been working as a labourer in Oman for 35 years. He made his family economically stable, built houses, educated his siblings and children. He has been trying to fulfill his family needs for 35 years, but family needs are endless. He said, “Earlier I was working to establish my siblings and later my children, then their spouse and children. I had to be the men in my family for all the male and female. I had no time to live.” His life experience explains the masculine expectation of the family and society from the migrant male worker. As the migrant male workers are surviving all their lives in abroad to serve for their family to fulfill the expectation of the family to become masculine and the breadwinner for everyone. But the migrant men are leaving in precarity (Standing 2011) for their whole life.

If a migrant man fails to accomplish familial and social expectations, or become masculine enough, are being faced shame, isolation by the society and family members. Which is social stigma by Goffman (1963). It is evident by the migrant male who returns to the home country after few years for various reasons. They are perceived as failures or burdens. When Shojol (32) returned to Bangladesh after 15 years, his family was unhappy with him. He was earning enough to pay the debt of his parents, built sustainable brick-built house. His family was frustrated because of his “illogical” decision of not going back to Oman. His mother said, “How can you as a man say that you didn’t feel good in there. As a man you only need to earn money. You brought shame to all of us”. Thus, returnee migrants are thought as a shame for the family and the precariousness (Standing 2011) is totally overlooked. Even the family is ready to live without him and with his money. These gendered aspects similarly made them vulnerable by the family and society to force them spending their lives abroad to prove themselves as a “masculine man”.

There were migrant men who died abroad as a worker and spent whole life to attain the family need. Their family feel honored for them as they have made the lives of other family members by getting a bulk amount of money. They are thought as a “real man” by the family and the society which represents the hegemonic masculinity. Zakir Hossain (40) died in Saudi Arab in a factory accident. His death made a scene after a declaration by his company to pay 50 lacs to his wife. His widow wife was the enemy to his mother, brothers and sisters as she will get the entire amount of money just because she was his wife. But there is no way to persuade the Saudi Arabian company to motivate their payment procedure. At last, his younger brother Sohail Hossain (30), who is 7 years younger than the wife, married his widow. His neighbor shared, “This is the ideal responsible man who sacrificed life for family.” This is the general expectation from the migrant men to sacrifice entire life for the family overlooking the precarity. Even though the migrant man go through gendered expectations, social stigma and force but he cannot share their low feelings to the society as he is a “strong man” who cannot be weak to share their melancholy. He is not allowed by patriarchal ideology to let anyone know that he can be

“Exploring hegemonic masculinity among immigrant men.”

vulnerable, distressed and broken. Nazir Khan (32) does not enjoy his laborer life in Qatar. It's been 7 years since he has been working there and is hoping to return. But his family discouraged him from returning. He shared, “I feel like they value me only for my migrant life but not if I return.” On the other hand, he is living a struggling life abroad without family, relatives, proper care, health facilities or healthy food. He feels anxiety and depression in the middle of a risky life. Even though, the migrant men go through mental breakdown but are not allowed to share those with anyone for being a ‘manly’ man. As our society always pressurize men to become ‘manly’ enough to hide their vulnerabilities from the society. They cannot even share their tears with their wife for being masculine enough. On the other hand, most of them live a messy married life full of conflicts and misunderstandings.

5. Structural and Institutional Vulnerabilities

Migrant men are prone to fraudulence from the beginning of their journey because of the unknown system and lack of network and education. Migration procedure is accomplished mostly through the recruitment agents or informal brokers and many of them got betrayed by the informal brokers (adom bepari), and even by the agency. After being cheated, they only left with a lot of debt to pay.



Malaysia-bound workers throng Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on Thursday (31 May) after they failed to get tickets from the recruiting agencies on time (The Business Standard, 31 May 2024).

This is a recent scenario of fraudulence by a government agency who arrange worker visa to Malaysia. The agency took 7 lacs BDT from 12,000 people to send them to Malaysia, where the capacity was only 2000. Monirul had even sold his land and borrowed money from relatives to afford the deal, which promised a monthly salary of 1,500 Malaysian ringgit. "If I can't go to Malaysia, I will have no choice but to die," he lamented.

Halim, a rickshaw driver from Narsingdi, said he paid Tk 5.5 lakh, all borrowed from various associations and villagers of high interest. "When we contact the agency, they are

not responding to us properly. I borrowed all this money. What will I go home with now?" he wept (The Business Standard, 31 May 2024). When the government agency treats the migrant worker in such way, it's obvious that informal brokers will take advantage of their ignorance as well. There are many men been betrayed by the informal brokers (adom bepari) in the country. Most of them are relatives, already living abroad and remains unreported. Shakil (23) paid 4 lacs to an uncle who is working in Dubai and promised to take him to Dubai soon. But it's been 2 years, there is no update on that. Shakil shared, "I trusted him as he is relative and already living there. I could not believe he would betray like this." Informal brokers most of the time show as a relative and betray by promising to take them abroad soon. But they are left with handsome amounts of debt only. Government seems ignorant in most cases.

Besides, betrayal from the family members is also usual scenario to the migrant men. Borhan Hossen (45), lived in Qatar for 20 years, came back for 7 years, her sisters and mother were disturbing his wife to leave as it was tough to take money from his wife. He knew this but how can he think his mother and sister are trying to break his marriage after doing all these for them, spending whole life for them. He shared, "It's tough to trust anyone when you are a migrant worker. You have no scope to learn the truth." There is a proverb in our society, that, "Migrant men cannot keep their wife." This also happens with many migrant men when they were staying abroad. Sohel Chand (47), went to Malaysia leaving his newly wed wife 23 years ago. His wife left him with all the money and jewelry with a boyfriend. Later he knew that the lady had an affair, but she was a "good wife" for two years. He shared that, "Maybe she was waiting for my money for these two years and then left. Whom should I trust? Tell me." He thought his brothers were greedy to take his money and sent everything in the name of wife, but she left as well. Thus, the migrant men face betrayal from the very close family members. Brothers on the other hand are another source of betrayal to the migrant men. Hasibul Haque (37) was working in Qatar for 15 years. He is still single. Her family never tried to marry him off. He has 3 brothers and 2 sisters. He was sending money to his parents. Everything was fine until 2 years ago, when he came to visit for one month and expressed to return permanently. He asked for the money he sent for these 15 years. His parents remain silent, and brothers clearly threatened to stay away from them. He told his parents that it was all his money and asked for at least few lacs, but they gave him nothing but a case file for fraudulence against him. Hasibul was totally broken and shared, "I earned for these bastards all my life. They drank my blood and now want to kill me. No one on this earth is trustworthy to a migrant worker."

6. Conclusion

Migration is not only a physical or economic journey, rather intensely psychological. For Bangladeshi immigrant men, the emotional and mental burden of working abroad under exploitative environment results psychological and emotional vulnerabilities. These mental health challenges are deeply intertwined with cultural expectations, economic hardship, and familial pressures. These experiences can lead to long-term psychological trauma. For many, the inability to escape or protest creates helplessness and anxiety. Upon return, these men may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including nightmares, panic attacks, emotional numbing, aggression etc.

“Exploring hegemonic masculinity among immigrant men.”

The return home mostly does not bring relief, rather psychological stress to the migrants. Many returnees are unable to fulfill the economic promises made to their families. They may return without savings, still in debt, or without any specific employment. In Bangladeshi society, where men are expected to be the economic backbone of their households, such outcomes are perceived as personal failures, which exacerbates emotional distress. Furthermore, Bangladeshi cultural norms of hegemonic masculinity discourage open discussion of emotional or psychological issues for immigrant men. Mental health is misunderstood, misdiagnosed, or attributed to moral weakness or spiritual causes. Returnees suffering from anxiety or depression may be told to "toughen up," pray more, or simply "forget the past". Many men experience their suffering in isolation. Without culturally appropriate mental health services or peer support, they have limited means to process their emotions or recover from trauma. Emotional instability often disrupts familial harmony. Returnee migrants may find it difficult to reintegrate into their families, and older parents may express disappointment over unmet expectations.

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“Exploring hegemonic masculinity among immigrant men.”

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