

ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 02. October-December 2025. Page# 1961-1868

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Patriarchy and Juvenile Gender-Based Misconduct in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study of Masculinity and Socialization

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Abstract

This research investigates the influence of entrenched patriarchal norms on juvenile sex offending in Pakistan, focusing on how masculinity is socially constructed and reinforced through media, peer dynamics and familial socialization. Employing a triangulated qualitative methodology, the study incorporates insights from three participant groups: adolescent boys, psychologists and juvenile justice professionals. The findings reveal that rigid gender socialization fosters toxic masculinity, male entitlement, emotional suppression and normalization of sexually harmful behavior. Adolescent peer groups reinforce a “complicit masculinity” culture that silences dissent and shields perpetrators, while digital media often devoid of regulatory oversight serves as a primary source of misinformation about gender roles and relationships. The absence of comprehensive sex and consent education leaves boys vulnerable to adopting hyper-masculine and misogynistic ideologies. By connecting lived experiences with broader theoretical frameworks such as Social Learning Theory and hegemonic masculinity, this study demonstrates how societal structures contribute to the justification and perpetuation of juvenile sexual violence. The study concludes by offering evidence-based recommendations for educational reform, gender-sensitive rehabilitation, community involvement and media regulation. It advocates for a structural reimagining of masculinity and the cultural narratives surrounding male behavior as a foundational step toward meaningful, long-term prevention of sexual violence.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Juvenile Sex Offending, Toxic Masculinity, Gender Socialization, Consent Education, Peer Influence, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Adolescent sexually harmful behavior remains a critically underexplored subject within the broader discourse of criminology, psychology and gender studies in Pakistan. While a considerable body of research addresses adult sexual violence, limited attention has been devoted to the formative social, cultural and psychological influences that shape sexually inappropriate or aggressive behaviors among adolescents. This gap is particularly concerning in patriarchal societies like Pakistan, where gendered power dynamics, rigid masculinity norms and limited access to sexual education converge to create environments that normalize or even encourage male dominance and control over female sexuality (Farias et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2022).

The entrenched patriarchal structure in Pakistan promotes a model of masculinity that values emotional suppression, physical dominance and unquestioned authority qualities often associated with toxic masculinity. Within this structure, conversations around sex, consent and gender relations are considered taboo, leading to a systemic lack of formal education and informed discourse (Ahmed & Noreen, 2021). As a result, adolescent boys often form their perceptions of masculinity and relationships from informal and frequently harmful sources such as peer circles, familial reinforcement, religious misinterpretations and digital media content (Bandura, 1977; CALCASA, 2010). These influences often glorify coercion, hyper-masculinity and the objectification of women (Connell, 1995), reinforcing attitudes that blur the lines between consent and entitlement.

The role of peer dynamics is particularly significant, as adolescent boys often operate within loyalty-driven masculine cultures that discourage emotional vulnerability and silence dissent. In these circles, sexually harmful behavior may be downplayed or even valorized as a symbol of masculine prowess. Simultaneously, the digital landscape exposes youth to misogynistic influencers and unregulated content that further amplifies distorted gender norms and hypersexualized attitudes.

This study investigates how adolescent boys in Pakistan internalize patriarchal values and how these internalizations contribute to the emergence of sexually harmful behaviors. Employing a triangulated qualitative methodology, the research draws on the insights of adolescent males, psychologists and juvenile justice professionals to explore the complex intersections of masculinity construction, cultural expectations, media exposure and peer complicity. By foregrounding these layered influences, the study contributes to an emerging and urgently needed understanding of the socio-cultural roots of adolescent sexual misconduct within South Asian societies. It aims to inform policy, educational reform and culturally responsive interventions focused on reshaping masculinities and reducing sexually harmful behaviors at the adolescent level.

2. Literature Review

The literature on juvenile sex offending has primarily focused on individual psychological factors or criminal justice responses, with limited attention to the socialization processes that shape offending behaviors. Feminist criminology, however, emphasizes that gender and power relations must be central to understanding sexual violence (Jakhmola & Arya, 2023). This perspective situates juvenile sex offending within

a broader structure of hegemonic masculinity, which upholds male dominance through emotional detachment, control and aggression (Connell, 1995).

Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory underscores how adolescents imitate behaviors they observe, especially when such behaviors are reinforced by peers, media or family. Within patriarchal societies, young boys frequently witness the valorization of male control, the marginalization of female voices and the normalization of sexual aggression (Munir & Sultana, 2022; Spivak et al., 2014). Consequently, this behavioral modeling plays a key role in developing attitudes that minimize the importance of consent and trivialize sexual boundaries.

Media representations also play a critical role in perpetuating gender stereotypes. Research highlights that Pakistani media often portrays women in submissive roles and glorifies hypermasculine characters (Khan & Qadir, 2024; Ashraf & Ibrar, 2024). Figures like Andrew Tate, whose content is widely accessible to adolescents, glorify male entitlement and misogyny, further exacerbating harmful norms (CALCASA, 2010).

Peer group dynamics, particularly among adolescent males, are another significant contributor. The concept of the "complicit masculinity" fosters loyalty that overrides ethical judgment, often protecting perpetrators from accountability (Antony & Manikandan, 2015). This peer complicity acts as a protective barrier for harmful behaviors and contributes to the formation of rape culture a societal condition where sexual violence is normalized and excused (Ahmed & Noreen, 2021).

The Pakistani legal framework, such as the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018), has made strides in promoting diversion and rehabilitation. However, it remains limited in addressing the gendered dimensions of juvenile offending. Without culturally responsive interventions and gender-sensitive rehabilitation, existing mechanisms fail to address the root causes of harmful masculinities (Ullah & Bakhsh, 2024).

Thus, a growing body of interdisciplinary literature emphasizes that addressing juvenile sex offending in patriarchal societies like Pakistan requires a multifaceted approach one that critically interrogates gender norms, reimagines masculinity and promotes educational reforms rooted in equality and empathy (Biholar & Leslie, 2024; Warner & Bartels, 2015).

To better illustrate the interconnected theoretical influences discussed above, Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that maps the progression from patriarchal social structures to adolescent sexually harmful behavior. This model synthesizes key themes from the literature such as hegemonic masculinity, peer complicity, social learning and digital media influence highlighting how these factors interact to reinforce toxic gender norms and normalize gender-based misconduct. The framework guided both the data collection and the thematic analysis in this study.

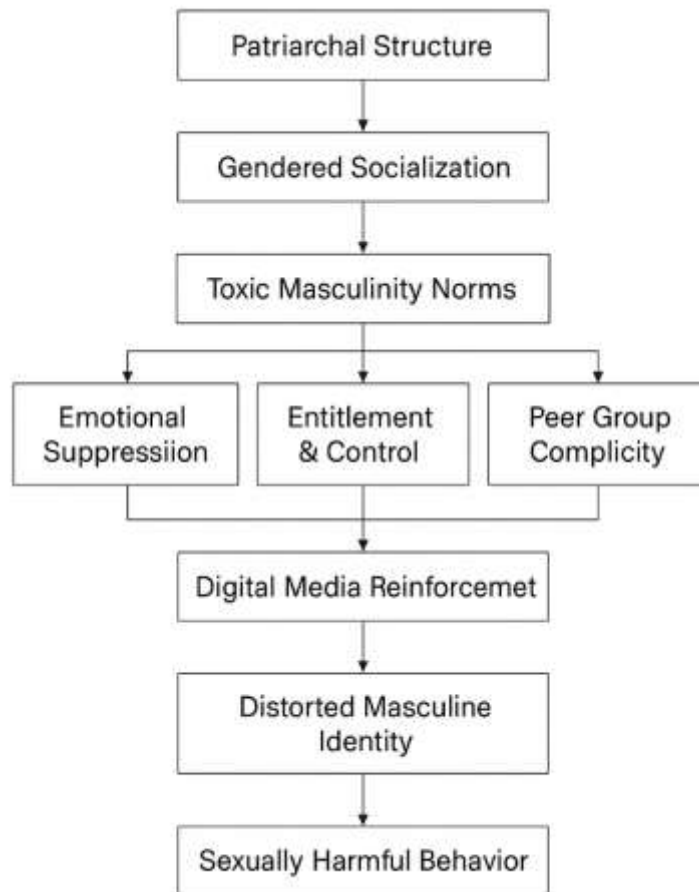


Figure 1. Conceptual Pathways from Patriarchy to Adolescent Sexually Harmful Behavior

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, triangulated research design to explore how patriarchal norms contribute to juvenile sex offending in Pakistan. A phenomenological approach was used to understand the lived experiences and social perceptions of three respondent groups: adolescent boys, psychologists and juvenile justice professionals. A purposive sampling strategy selected 15 participants (five from each group) based on their relevance to the research context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted in either Urdu or English depending on participant preference and were audio-recorded with informed consent.

Thematic analysis guided the coding and interpretation process, allowing for the identification of cross-cutting themes related to masculinity, entitlement, peer pressure and media influence. Triangulation strengthened the validity of findings by comparing insights across different participant groups. Ethical approval was obtained and participants were ensured anonymity and voluntary participation. The study's

design allowed for a culturally grounded and ethically sensitive examination of the socialization processes contributing to juvenile sex offending within a patriarchal framework.

4. Results and Discussion

The insights emerging from this study gathered through qualitative interviews with adolescents, psychologists and justice professionals uncover deeply embedded sociocultural forces that shape juvenile sex offending in Pakistan. Different reinterpreted and interconnected themes emerged:

4.1 Masculinity Framed Through Emotional Endurance

Adolescent boys equated manhood with emotional control and suppression, associating vulnerability with weakness.

"Crying or talking about feelings? That's for girls, not for us. My brother always tells me to toughen up," shared one adolescent.

Psychologists emphasized that this emotional detachment cultivates a lack of empathy an essential barrier against sexually aggressive conduct. Over time, emotional repression fosters a psychological framework where aggression is valorized and sensitivity is shunned.

4.2 Male Supremacy as Inherited Norm

Participants revealed that male entitlement was reinforced through family values, religious misinterpretations and societal messaging.

"Even if we don't talk about it, everyone knows the boy leads. Women are made to follow. That's the rule," explained one boy.

Experts highlighted that such ideologies legitimize dominance in gendered interactions and dilute the concept of mutual consent. The assumption of male authority creates a gendered power imbalance that fosters exploitative behavior.

4.3 Peer Loyalty and Silence as Enablers

Boys expressed strong allegiance to male peer groups, often prioritizing loyalty over accountability. Moral lapses were overlooked in favor of preserving camaraderie.

"We don't rat out our friends. Even if he does something bad, we protect each other," an adolescent admitted.

Justice professionals noted that this 'code of silence' within peer groups obstructs ethical reflection and legal intervention, allowing harmful behaviors to persist without consequence.

4.4 Digital Platforms as Alternative Educators

Without access to formal sex or gender education, boys turned to online personalities and unregulated digital content to learn about relationships and masculinity.

"Online videos show how to be strong, how to control situations. It's better than listening to boring lectures," remarked one participant.

Mental health professionals warned that these online narratives often glorify dominance and misogyny, reinforcing problematic behaviors as admirable and masculine.

4.5 Reinforcement of Harmful Masculine Role Models

Participants idolized hyper-masculine influencers who portrayed dominance as the hallmark of male success.

"We watch these guys online who say real men don't take no for an answer. They're rich, strong and respected—that's what I want to be," shared another participant.

Psychologists observed that such figures reinforce ideals where coercion is normalized, creating an aspirational identity rooted in control rather than empathy or respect.

4.6 Trivialization of Consent and Gender Misunderstandings

A worrying trend was the misunderstanding or neglect of consent.

"If a girl is talking nicely or laughing, that means she's okay with it. Why would she talk if she didn't like it?" one adolescent stated.

Such misinterpretations, according to experts, stem from the absence of formal consent education and reflect a broader societal failure to challenge gender-based misconceptions.

4.7 Cultural Silence and Sexual Curiosity

Sexual topics remained taboo in most households, leading adolescents to seek alternative and often inappropriate sources of knowledge.

"Nobody at home talks about these things. We have to learn from somewhere and the internet is always there," said another participant.

This cultural silence exacerbates misinformation, fosters shame and encourages secretive, potentially harmful behaviors rooted in curiosity and misinformation.

4.8 Institutional Gaps and Oversights

Juvenile justice professionals criticized the system for prioritizing punishment over psychological insight.

"We focus too much on the crime and too little on why it happened," said a Professional. *"There's a lack of psychological profiling, gender sensitivity and counseling support in most cases."*

These insights stress the need for gender-responsive, rehabilitative models that address the ideological roots of offending behavior rather than merely punishing outcomes.

In sum, the study reveals that juvenile sex offending in Pakistan is shaped by complex cultural, psychological and structural factors. These factors combine to produce, justify and shield harmful behaviors under the guise of masculinity. Early and holistic interventions are needed through education, community reform and digital regulation to dismantle these toxic norms and build pathways toward healthier, equitable masculinities.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how entrenched patriarchal norms in Pakistan shape the construction of adolescent masculinity and contribute to juvenile sex offending. Through a triangulated qualitative approach involving adolescent boys, psychologists and juvenile justice professionals, the findings reveal that hegemonic

masculinity rooted in emotional suppression, male entitlement, peer complicity and media influence normalizes harmful gender behaviors and desensitizes young males to issues of consent and accountability.

Boys internalize cultural expectations that associate masculinity with dominance and emotional detachment, reinforced by familial teachings, peer culture and the glorification of hyper-masculine figures on digital platforms. The absence of formal gender education and open discourse on sexuality creates a vacuum filled by misinformation, leading to skewed understandings of relationships and consent. Peer group dynamics, especially the valorization of the “*complicit masculinity*,” further enable complicity in harmful behaviors, while institutional responses often neglect the underlying ideological drivers of such offenses.

The study highlights the urgent need for culturally responsive educational reforms, early intervention programs and gender-sensitive justice mechanisms. Interventions must go beyond punitive frameworks to challenge the ideological roots of male entitlement and sexual violence. Only by transforming the social narratives around masculinity can sustainable, long-term prevention of juvenile sex offending be achieved in patriarchal societies like Pakistan.

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