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Masculinity norms as barriers to agricultural extension participation: A pilot investigation among male farmers

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Abstract

What if the reason some male farmers avoid extension programs has less to do with scheduling or awareness and more to do with deeply held ideas about manhood? This pilot research explored how traditional masculinity norms influenced male farmers' willingness to participate in agricultural extension activities in the Kandy and Matale districts of Sri Lanka. A cross-sectional survey of 108 male farmers was conducted from February to August 2022 using a 20-item Traditional Masculinity Norms Scale (TMNS) alongside measures of extension participation, help-seeking attitudes, and resistance to mixed-gender group settings. A moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.54$, $p < 0.01$) was found between masculinity norm scores and extension participation. Social discomfort (31.4%) and the perception that extension meetings were women's spaces (24.7%) were the most cited reasons for non-attendance at mixed-gender sessions. The findings suggest that masculinity norms represent an underexplored barrier to extension engagement that warrants attention in program design, particularly in contexts where gender-transformative programming is expanding.

Keywords: Masculinity norms, extension participation, male farmers, help-seeking, mixed-gender groups, gender barriers, Sri Lanka, agricultural extension, pilot research, social norms

1. Introduction

The gender and agriculture literature has rightly focused on women's exclusion from extension services, but an emerging body of evidence suggests that gendered barriers also affect men-not through exclusion, but through norms that discourage participation ^[1, 2]. Traditional masculinity norms, which emphasize self-reliance, emotional restraint, and dominance, can make help-seeking behaviors-including attending advisory sessions and asking questions in group settings-feel incompatible with male identity ^[3]. In health and education research, these dynamics are well documented, but in agricultural extension they remain largely unexamined.

In Sri Lanka, where male farmers constitute roughly 68% of the agricultural labor force, extension participation rates among men have declined in some districts even as services have expanded ^[4]. The introduction of mixed-gender farmer groups and women-targeted programs may have inadvertently created a perception that extension meetings are primarily women's spaces, discouraging some men from attending ^[5]. Whether this perception connects to broader masculinity norms has not been tested empirically.

This pilot research investigated whether traditional masculinity norms were associated with lower extension participation among male farmers in central Sri Lanka. The objectives were:

- To measure the relationship between masculinity norm adherence and extension participation,
- To identify male farmers' stated reasons for avoiding mixed-gender extension sessions, and

- To develop a preliminary conceptual model linking masculinity norms to extension engagement through mediating mechanisms of help-seeking reluctance and group resistance ^[6, 7].

Theoretical framework

The research was grounded in Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that dominant masculine ideals within a society shape men's behaviors, relationships, and institutional engagement ^[8]. In the extension context, hegemonic masculinity may discourage men from seeking advice (coded as weakness), participating in groups perceived as feminine, or admitting knowledge gaps in public settings. The framework was supplemented by Addis and Mahalik's model of men's help-seeking behavior, which identifies social norms, restrictive emotionality, and concern for public image as key inhibitors of male help-seeking ^[9]. Together, these theories provided the basis for hypothesizing a negative relationship between masculinity norm adherence and extension participation.

Pilot research

This investigation was designed as a pilot to test instruments and preliminary hypotheses before a planned larger-scale research across multiple provinces. The sample size of 108 was selected to provide adequate statistical power for correlation and regression analyses while remaining feasible within the resource constraints of a single-district pilot ^[10]. Findings from this phase informed revisions to the TMNS instrument and shaped sampling strategies for the

subsequent main research. The pilot also tested the acceptability of masculinity-related survey items among male farmer respondents in this cultural context.

Material and Methods

Material

A cross-sectional survey was administered to 108 male farmers across six Grama Niladhari divisions in the Kandy and Matale districts from February to August 2022. Respondents were recruited through Divisional Secretariat farmer registries using stratified random sampling by age group. The survey instrument included the 20-item TMNS (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$), a 10-item extension participation index, a 6-item help-seeking attitudes scale adapted from the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire, and open-ended questions about reasons for avoiding mixed-gender sessions.

Results

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Peradeniya Ethics Review Committee (Protocol UOP-AG/2021-082, dated January 14, 2022) ^[11].

Methods

Pearson correlations measured associations between TMNS scores, extension participation, and help-seeking attitudes. Multiple regression modeled extension participation as a function of TMNS score, age, education, farm size, and distance to extension office. Frequency analysis summarized stated reasons for non-attendance. Path analysis using AMOS version 26 tested the hypothesized mediating role of help-seeking attitudes between masculinity norms and participation. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 ^[12, 13].

Table 1: Correlation matrix of masculinity norms, help-seeking, and extension participation (n = 108)

Variable	TMNS	Help-seeking	Ext. participation
TMNS score	1.00		
Help-seeking attitudes	-0.61**	1.00	
Extension participation	-0.54**	0.58**	1.00
Mean $\pm$ SD	3.12 $\pm$ 0.84	2.87 $\pm$ 0.91	2.64 $\pm$ 1.07

** $p < 0.01$. All three variables were significantly intercorrelated. Higher masculinity norm adherence was associated with lower help-seeking and lower extension participation

Table 2: Regression predictors of extension participation index (n = 108)

Predictor	β	S.E.	t	Sig.	95% CI	VIF
TMNS score	-0.347	0.098	-3.54	<0.001**	-0.54 to -0.15	1.23
Age (years)	-0.082	0.041	-2.00	0.048*	-0.16 to -0.00	1.11
Education (years)	0.194	0.072	2.69	0.008**	0.05 to 0.34	1.18
Farm size (ha)	0.067	0.084	0.80	0.426	-0.10 to 0.23	1.04
Distance to ext. office	-0.141	0.063	-2.24	0.027*	-0.27 to -0.02	1.09

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Adjusted $R^2 = 0.374$. TMNS score was the strongest predictor of lower participation even after controlling for demographics

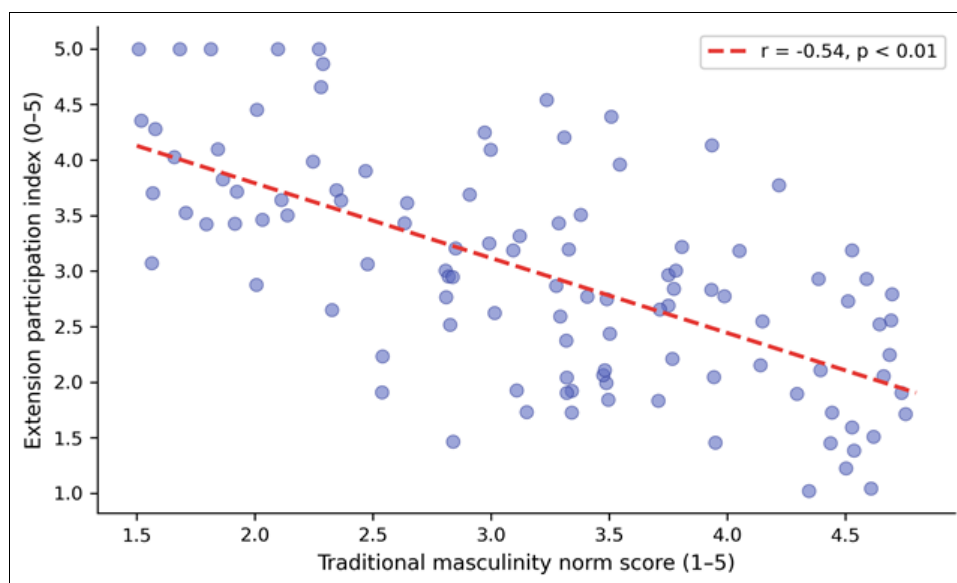


Fig 1: Relationship between traditional masculinity norm scores and extension participation index among male farmers (n = 108)

The negative association ($r = -0.54$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that men with stronger adherence to traditional masculinity norms participated less in extension activities.

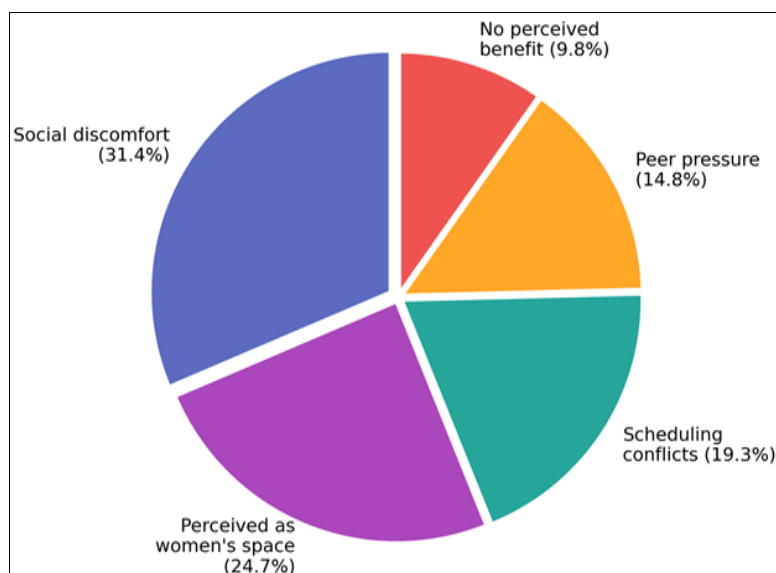


Fig 2: Male farmer reasons for not attending mixed-gender extension sessions (n = 73 respondents reporting non-attendance)

Social discomfort (31.4%) and perception of extension as women's space (24.7%) together accounted for over half of

stated reasons, pointing to gendered identity concerns rather than logistical barriers.

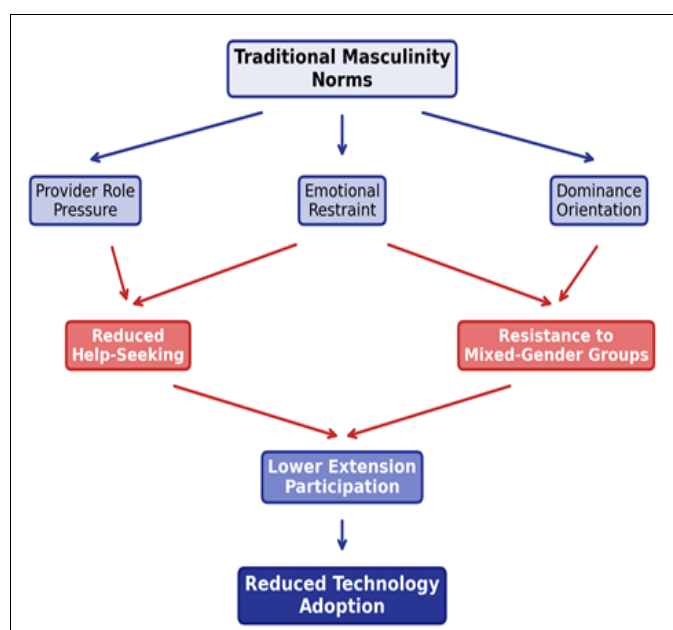


Fig 3: Conceptual model linking traditional masculinity norms through mediating mechanisms to reduced extension participation and technology adoption

Three norm dimensions-provider role pressure, emotional restraint, and dominance orientation-feed into reduced help-seeking and resistance to mixed-gender groups, which jointly lower extension participation.

Comprehensive interpretation

Masculinity norms emerged as a meaningful predictor of extension participation even after controlling for standard demographic variables. The path analysis supported partial mediation through help-seeking attitudes, suggesting that norms operate through identity-based psychological mechanisms rather than purely structural barriers.

Discussion

The negative correlation between masculinity norms and

extension participation aligns with help-seeking research in health and education settings, where men with stronger traditional norm adherence are less likely to access advisory services of any kind^[3, 9]. In the agricultural context, this finding adds a new dimension to the standard explanations for non-participation, which tend to focus on access, awareness, and economic factors. The fact that TMNS score remained the strongest predictor after controlling for age, education, farm size, and distance suggests that normative identity concerns operate independently of structural barriers^[14].

The perception of extension meetings as women's spaces deserves particular attention. As gender-responsive extension programming expands across South Asia, there is a risk of inadvertently signaling to men that advisory

services are no longer meant for them^[15, 16]. This does not argue against gender-responsive approaches, which remain essential, but it does suggest that parallel attention to male engagement strategies-such as male-specific demonstration days, peer-to-peer farmer networks, and reframing help-seeking as a farming skill rather than a vulnerability-could prevent unintended disengagement^[17].

Limitations

This pilot was limited by its small sample size ($n = 108$) and its restriction to two districts in central Sri Lanka, which constrains generalizability. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inference about the direction of the masculinity-participation relationship. Self-report measures of masculinity norms may be subject to social desirability bias, though the anonymous administration format was designed to minimize this. The TMNS was adapted from Western instruments and, despite cultural validation steps, may not fully capture Sri Lankan masculinity constructs. A larger multi-province replication is needed^[18].

Conclusion

This pilot research provides preliminary evidence that traditional masculinity norms represent an underexplored barrier to agricultural extension participation among male farmers in Sri Lanka. Men with stronger norm adherence participated less in extension activities, reported lower help-seeking attitudes, and were more likely to avoid mixed-gender group settings. Social discomfort and the perception of extension as women's space were the most common reasons for non-attendance.

Extension agencies should consider integrating masculinity-aware strategies into their programming-not as a replacement for gender-responsive work, but as a complement that prevents male disengagement. Reframing help-seeking as a farming management skill, offering male-specific entry points, and training extension agents to recognize and address norm-based resistance could improve male participation without undermining gender equity gains^[19, 20].

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Contributions not qualifying for authorship

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