

“I would rather die than reveal these feelings”: The manosphere, Zambian masculinities, and four disruptive narratives

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between dominant masculinities in the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ) and contemporary manosphere masculinities. Drawing on prior qualitative research with RCZ ministers and members, it reappraises four dominant narratives of Zambian masculinity through the manosphere lens, while avoiding claims of direct ideological transmission. The article argues that the two contexts are better understood through a structural analogy: both reproduce a dominance-fragility cycle in which masculine worth is secured through strength, control, heterosexuality, provision and emotional suppression, while failure to meet these expectations produces shame, vulnerability and exclusion. The article further develops a theological response centred on cruciform masculinity, ubuntu and Eucharistic community. Rather than treating the manosphere as an external phenomenon imposed upon African churches, the analysis identifies how older patriarchal structures can be reproduced, intensified and repackaged within contemporary digital cultures, while also pointing towards alternative, relational forms of masculinity.

Keywords

manosphere; masculinity; dominance-fragility cycle; Reformed Church in Zambia; practical theology; cruciform masculinity; ubuntu; heteronormativity; patriarchy; African Christianity

Part one: The manosphere and its African presence

1.1 What is the manosphere?

The word “manosphere” refers to a collection of websites, social media accounts, blogs, influencers, and online forums that promote specific types of masculinities. The manosphere is hard to plot, but as an umbrella term it encompasses several distinct subcultures (Ging 2019:639–640; Jones 2020:3–5; Gerrand et al. 2025:443–464), including:

- *Men's Rights Activists* (MRAs): Advocate for legal changes to benefit men, believing in systemic bias against men in family courts.
- *Men Going Their Own Way* (MGTOW): Advocate for men to separate entirely from women and societal expectations.
- *Pick-up Artists* (PUAs): Focus on strategies for seducing women.
- *Incels* (Involuntary Celibates): Men who feel entitled to a relationship but cannot find one, frequently characterised by hostility toward women.
- *Looksmaxxing*: A newer subculture of men who obsessively optimise their physical appearance through methods ranging from grooming to dangerous procedures like bone smashing or unregulated pharmaceuticals.

While not all manosphere influencers and platforms share the same content, they are connected by overlapping audiences and by recurring claims about masculinity, gender hierarchy, and male grievance. Recent peer-reviewed scholarship is especially useful here: Gerrand et al. (2025:443–445) describe the contemporary manosphere as a rapidly changing online ecosystem shaped by new platforms, influencer culture, monetisation, ideological diversification, and algorithmic amplification. This broader framing is important because the manosphere should not be treated as a single, coherent movement or as synonymous with any one influencer.

The manosphere uses distinctive jargon, including the “red pill” and “blue pill” metaphor from *The Matrix* movie. Members who believe they have been awakened from the feminist “delusion” have “taken the red pill.” Other terms include “cuck,” “beta,” “soy boy,” and “white knight” (Galla 2022: e-resource). The core ideology centres on male grievance, resistance to

feminism, and restoring hierarchical gender relations. Recent scholarship cautions, however, against treating these communities as ideologically uniform: their boundaries are increasingly porous, their platforms diverse, and their political commitments sometimes contradictory (Gerrand et al. 2025:445, 450–452).

Drawing particularly on the recent scholarly mapping by Gerrand et al. (2025:443–464), together with Ging (2019) and Jones, Trott and Wright (2020), five recurring propositions are useful for the present analysis:

- *First, hierarchy is natural.* Men are naturally dominant; women are naturally submissive. Andrew Tate, the manosphere's most visible figurehead, states that “women are the property of men” (Das 2022: e-resource; BBC News 2023: e-resource).
- *Second, vulnerability is weakness.* The manosphere valorises what Connell (2005:77–81) calls “hegemonic masculinity”, emotional control, stoicism, and policing vulnerability among men (Ging 2019:639–640; Galla 2022: e-resource).
- *Third, women cannot be trusted.* Hence the obsession with “sims” – a derogatory term for men perceived as showing excessive deference to women – and advocacy for “one-way monogamy” (Galla 2022: e-resource; Jones 2020:3–5; Alptraum 2020: n.p).
- *Fourth, the body must be optimised.* “Looksmaxxing” – ranging from “softmaxxing” (gym, skincare) to “hardmaxxing” (surgery, unregulated pharmaceuticals, and other extreme physical interventions) – represents one contemporary extension of the broader self-optimisation logic of the manosphere (Gerrand et al. 2025:447–449). This logic is not simply about appearance. It turns masculinity into a continual project of performance and self-surveillance under the gaze of other men.
- *Fifth, homosexuality is positioned as a corruption of legitimate masculinity.* The manosphere is frequently structured by heteronormative and homophobic boundary-making. Farrell et al. (2019:88) found homophobic language alongside racism and misogyny in their analysis of six million posts across manosphere communities. This is significant for the present argument because compulsory heterosexuality does not merely exclude queer people;

it also helps define the boundaries within which heterosexual masculinity must be performed.

What the manosphere offers, in essence, is a diagnosis of male suffering and a prescription for its cure. The diagnosis is that men have been emasculated by feminism, economic precarity, and changing norms around emotional expression. The prescription is renewed dominance: suppress vulnerability, control women, optimise the self, and become the “alpha.” Gerrand et al. (2025:447–448, 453–454) show how this logic is increasingly connected to influencer culture, monetisation, and individualised solutions to structural insecurity. It is precisely this movement from fragility to dominance – and the fragility that dominance subsequently produces – that makes the Zambian dominance-fragility cycle analytically important.

1.2 Is the manosphere in Africa?

Available evidence suggests the manosphere is no longer confined to Western online spaces. It has become a transnational digital ecosystem whose platforms, idioms, and influencers circulate across national and ethnic boundaries (Gerrand et al. 2025:445, 450–452). The question for this article, however, is more specific: what can responsibly be said about its presence in Zambia?

Evidence of significant manosphere activity is strongest elsewhere on the continent. Kenyan researcher Odanga Madung has documented extensive manosphere activity in Kenya, while research on Kenyan online spaces traces the circulation of terms such as “red pill” and “simp” (Madung 2025; Maina 2025:151–153; Kim 2026: e-resource). Across Africa, the emergence of Black and other non-white manosphere actors also challenges the assumption that the phenomenon is simply a Western import (Gerrand et al. 2025:450–451).

The roster of African manosphere influencers is substantial and growing, although the examples available for this article are concentrated outside Zambia. The table therefore establishes a regional African context rather than evidence of a specifically Zambian influencer network:

Influencer	Country	Reach	Key Messaging
Amerix (Eric Amunga)	Kenya	2.3M X followers	“Only men can give strength to society”; “Do not be nice to women”
Shadaya Knight	Zimbabwe	700K X followers	Called “Zimbabwe’s Andrew Tate”
Naty Mon	Ethiopia	500K TikTok	Uses Biblical arguments to claim women are not equal to men
Àgbà John Doe	Nigeria	1.6M+ combined	“You’ll hardly know a woman’s true character until her hymen is broken”
AdvoBarryRoux	South Africa	2.3M X followers	Parody account spreading misogynistic content

The economic incentives driving misogynistic content on social media platforms in Africa closely mirror those identified in wider manosphere research. Gerrand et al. (2025:447–448) show how influencer culture and platform economies can monetise masculine insecurity by turning perceived crisis into a marketable problem and then selling individualised solutions.

However, financial motivation alone does not account for the resonance of such content. The contemporary manosphere addresses social and emotional needs by offering a simple diagnosis for complex forms of insecurity – economic uncertainty, changing gender norms, loneliness, and perceived loss of masculine status (Gerrand et al. 2025:447–448, 453–454). This matters for Zambia because similar pressures can exist without demonstrating that Zambian men have adopted manosphere content.

In many African contexts, young men experience economic marginalisation and find it increasingly difficult to fulfil traditional provider roles (Van Jaarsveld 2022:254–258). The manosphere simplifies this predicament by advocating renewed dominance as a solution. In Zambia, the seriousness of gendered violence is independently evident in NGOCC reporting: its Q3 2025 statistics recorded 31,246 cases of gender-based violence, with women comprising 79% of victims (NGOCC 2025b: e-resource). This statistic does not demonstrate manosphere influence; rather, it establishes the social context in which competing constructions of masculinity matter.

This brings me to my own research. During my fieldwork in the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ), a minister recounted: “We see young men in the congregation struggle with their sense of purpose and authority. Some adopt aggressive attitudes, believing it is the only way to reclaim respect – yet others challenge this, asking, ‘Is this what God wants for us?’” This observation predates the current framing of the manosphere and must therefore not be read retrospectively as evidence of online influence.

The distinction is important. Zambia does not currently provide the evidence needed to claim a direct transmission pathway from prominent secular manosphere influencers to RCZ masculinities. Nor should the absence of a prominent Zambian influencer be treated as evidence that manosphere ideology is operating through churches. What can be argued is more precise: the masculinities documented in my earlier research and the contemporary manosphere display a structural analogy. Both can organise masculinity around dominance, provision, control, heterosexual legitimacy, and the suppression of vulnerability. The similarities therefore invite comparison, not a claim of causation.

This institutionalisation of manosphere scripts is further illuminated by Lillian Cheelo Siwila’s research on the social construction of masculinities in Zambia (2022:33–54). Siwila describes three principal forms of masculinity that currently shape social and religious life in the country:

- *Traditional manliness* (2022:42–48) is deeply rooted in cultural and patriarchal norms, often leading to the marginalisation of women and gay men. This form is evident within church teachings, where male authority is emphasised. Men are expected to command respect and occupy positions of power, with an implicit understanding that they need not justify their actions – especially not to women. Cultural traditions are frequently invoked to control women’s and girls’ reproductive rights, reinforcing gender hierarchies.
- *White-collar masculinity* (2022:48–49) equates manhood with employment and educational attainment. Having a job and achieving economic self-sufficiency are considered essential markers of being a “real man.” While physical labour was traditionally the standard, contemporary expectations increasingly require education to

maintain masculine status. Economic and social standing thus become central to masculine identity.

- *Clerical hero masculinity* (2022:49–51) is characterised by the assertion of power and the subordination of women, particularly within spiritual and administrative roles. Pastors exemplify this patriarchal masculinity by wielding authority in both church and community. The pulpit becomes a stage for the display of dominance, frequently reinforcing gendered power dynamics.

Siwila's findings complement and reinforce my own observations, but they do not establish a causal relationship with the contemporary manosphere. Rather, they show that patriarchal expectations are already institutionally and culturally embedded in Zambia. The central question of this article is consequently not whether the RCZ was "influenced" by the manosphere. It is what becomes visible when these older Zambian masculinities are placed in critical dialogue with a contemporary transnational form of male-supremacist discourse. The comparison brings the dominance-fragility cycle into sharper focus and opens a practical-theological question: what kind of ecclesiology can interrupt a masculinity that secures male worth through hierarchy and exclusion?

1.3 Research design and data sources

Between 2018 and 2022, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Lusaka, Zambia, focused on the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ). The research drew on multiple sources of data (Van Jaarsveld 2022:24–26, 133–141): semi-structured interviews and informal discussions, archival material and theses from Justo Mwale University (JMU) students, my field journal, follow-up research, and social media content from RCZ members and pastors who befriended me on Facebook after my fieldwork. Because this fieldwork was conducted before the contemporary African manosphere became the object of this article, the data cannot establish that respondents were influenced by Tate, red-pill communities, or other online manosphere actors.

I used two hermeneutical lenses to interpret the data. First, lived religion focuses on how people live their lives in relation to religion, arguing that theology exists not only in doctrine but in the concrete, ordinary, everyday

lives of people (Ganzevoort 2009; Ward 2017:56–57). Second, the Dialogical Self-theory posits that each person represents a multiplicity of internal and external I-positions in dialogue (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon 1992:23–33; Hermans 2001:243–281). Using these lenses, I coded the empirical data into four dominant storylines (Van Jaarsveld 2022:141–156). These emerged inductively from the data, not imposed from theory. In this article, I reread those findings through a single theological lens: a cruciform understanding of masculinity in which power is expressed through vulnerability, self-giving, relationality, and service rather than domination. The manosphere functions here as a comparative context through which the contradictions in the Zambian material become more visible, not as a claimed source of those contradictions.

Part two: Four dominant narratives from Zambian research

2.1 Dominant storyline 1: Religious normativity (Biblical manhood)

This storyline corresponds with what Van Klinken (2016:109–130) terms “biblical manhood” – the religious and clerical expectations directed at men in a nation that proudly identifies as Christian. It consists of expectations that a “good man” or “man of God” should embody leadership, responsibility, provision, self-control, and headship (Van Jaarsveld 2022:244–248).

Key I-positions identified (Van Jaarsveld 2022:146–152):

- *I as a leader/head:* Male headship as God-ordained. “A man is a leader... God has deposited in man a leadership quality” (R6_M). “First and foremost is clear that men are the head of the family” (R3_M).
- *I as a man of God:* God-fearing, living according to Christian values. “A good man should be God-fearing and should have integrity” (R8_F).
- *I as a provider:* Providing spiritually, financially, emotionally, and physically. “A good man can take care of his family” (R4_M).
- *I as someone who practises self-control:* Abstaining from alcohol, promiscuity, and immoral behaviour, aligning with Van Klinken’s (2016:129–130) identification of self-control as central to biblical manhood.

The contradiction within this storyline (Van Jaarsveld 2022:245–249):

While promoting positive values (sobriety, family commitment, responsibility), this storyline also installs religiously endorsed patriarchy that excludes men who cannot meet these standards – unmarried men, unemployed men, men with disabilities, men who struggle with addiction, and men who experience same-sex attraction. The emphasis on “self-control” often translates into silence about sexuality, contributing to HIV vulnerability. Moreover, women pastors continue to experience marginalisation.

R10_F described: “It’s like you are in this open space where all eyes are on you... because any mistake I make, people will be able to refer to say: ‘This is why we were saying women cannot be leaders’” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:160).

The manosphere’s “alpha” ideal – dominant, controlling, never vulnerable – finds a religious echo here. But where the manosphere rejects religion as feminised, Zambian churches offer the same patriarchal scripts with divine endorsement. The difference is not the message but the messenger.

2.2 Dominant storyline 2: Cultural normativity (Socio-cultural inscriptions)

This storyline involves culturally prescribed expectations inscribed on men’s bodies – what Butler (1999:165–167) calls the body as the “surface of cultural inscription”. These are not merely ideals; they are performed, enacted, and embodied in daily life (Van Jaarsveld 2022:254–258).

The practice of *lobola* (bride price) exemplifies this. R10_F explained: “Before the marriage itself, a man pays something, and that payment, they feel like they have bought this woman ... Because I paid, I have the right to beat her” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:164). Elphick (2012:71–72) notes that *lobola* may imply that a woman’s body and reproductive rights belong to the groom.

Key I-positions identified (Van Jaarsveld 2022:148–151):

- *I as a family man*: Heteronormative family values; marriage as marker of manhood. “A good man in Zambia takes care of his family” (R3_M).

- *I as a good lover*: Sexual virility as proof of masculinity. “I understand that as a Christian sex is a gift that God gives” (R2_M), yet “our people don’t talk about sex openly; it’s seen as a taboo” (R6_M).
- *I as a labourer/educated person*: Hard work and education as masculine duties. “A man should be able to work hard” (R2_M); “Earn your own sweat – that’s what the bible tells us” (R9_F).
- *I as a strong person*: Physical strength, toughness, emotional suppression. “Traditionally we are taught that a man is supposed to be strong. Even if you are bitten by bees and wasps and snakes, you shouldn’t cry” (R4_M).
- *I as someone with power*: Control, authority, dominance. “A man wants to control things, wants to be in control” (R1_M).

The contradiction within this storyline (Van Jaarsveld 2022:256–258):

These cultural scripts directly intersect with the manosphere’s messages. However, while manosphere influencers present these scripts as liberating, my respondents named them as crushing. Moreover, women are often the custodians of these practices. R8_F described marriage preparation: “They will tell you: ‘You have to respect a man... No matter what you do, what career you have, you need to respect a man’” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:160–161). This internalisation – what Nadar and Potgieter (2010:141) term “formenism” – makes transformation particularly challenging.

2.3 Dominant storyline 3: The male dominance-male fragility cycle

This central heuristic captures the reciprocal relationship between dominance and fragility. Men are expected to dominate (be strong, provide, lead, control), but when they fail – due to unemployment, poverty, illness, disability, or emotional struggle – they experience intense fragility: shame, emasculation, powerlessness, anxiety, depression. To reassert masculinity, they may “act out” through violence, alcohol abuse, or aggression (Van Jaarsveld 2022:263–267). The cycle is therefore more than a tension: it is a consequential contradiction in which the very practices intended to secure masculine worth can reproduce the insecurity they promise to overcome. This resonates with recent manosphere scholarship showing how male grievance and individualised self-improvement can feed one another within a commercialised ecosystem (Gerrand et al. 2025:447–448).

Key I-positions identified (Van Jaarsveld 2022:150–152):

- *I as a gender advocate:* Ambivalence of respondents who affirmed equality while perpetuating discrimination.
- *I as an unemployed person:* “One of the biggest struggles ... a lot of job losses ... the man is expected to provide. And there he is, he has got no job” (R4_M).
- *I as someone who drinks alcohol:* “The ones who are beating up their wives, the bad men are always drunk” (R4_M).
- *I as someone who experiences vulnerability and shame:* “If a man confronts a woman to say this is what I’m feeling, then he is considered to be a weak man. I would rather die than reveal these feelings to a lady” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:151). The quotation is from a female respondent describing what men are taught; it should therefore not be read as a male respondent’s own report of feeling. Its significance lies precisely in what it reveals about the social teaching of masculinity.

R4_M’s testimony is particularly stark:

“If you tell me that I must provide food at all costs, I don’t think that is being fair to me ... in case I fail to provide ... I may commit suicide, I may be depressed ... I may be forced to steal or commit a crime ... I will just have a very low self-esteem” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:144).

The table below illustrates this reciprocal relationship (Van Jaarsveld 2022:266–267):

Expressions of Dominance	Manifestations of Fragility
Physical strength and toughness	Shame when unable to provide
Sexual virility and multiple partners	Emasculation when impotent or unemployed
Control over women’s bodies	Powerlessness when women earn more
Aggression to assert authority	Depression and suicide ideation when failing
Alcohol consumption to prove manliness	Anxiety about not measuring up
Refusal to seek help	Premature death from preventable causes

Notably, interviewees did not mention HIV/AIDS when discussing GBV (Van Jaarsveld 2022:162). GBV was defined only as wife-beating, leaving out rape, sexual assault, and links to HIV (Phiri 2003:14–15; Jewkes et al. 2010:42; Muluneh et al. 2020:2). This omission reflects both the manosphere and these systems' neglect of women's sexual and reproductive health, exposing women to harm while prioritising men's interests.

2.4 Dominant storyline 4: Queer erasure and heteronormative enforcement

Queer erasure emerged as a powerful structuring force during my fieldwork. I was explicitly warned not to engage in discussions about homosexuality in the RCZ. When the topic arose, it was met with hostility, disgust, or silence (Van Jaarsveld 2022:165; Van Jaarsveld 2023:3–5).

Key observations (Van Jaarsveld 2022:165, 200–201):

- The few respondents willing to give an opinion did so “with strong anti-gay sentiments.”
- One respondent stated that homosexuality is “un-African, un-Christian and a Western invention.”
- Male respondents “were more upset about homosexuality than about gender-based violence.”
- Zambia criminalises same-sex relationships under colonial-era sodomy laws, with penalties up to 14 years' imprisonment (Van Klinken & Phiri 2020:313; Human Dignity Trust 2024, e-resource). Yet queer Zambian Christians exist, developing grassroots theologies affirming their dignity (Van Klinken 2019:4–5; Van Klinken & Phiri 2020:317–318).

The contradiction within this storyline (Van Jaarsveld 2022:251):

Anti-LGBT rhetoric has become politically useful in Zambia (Van Klinken 2014:266–271). As Nigerian journalist Bibi Alimi observes, “if you hate gay people, you get votes” (Alimi 2015, e-resource). The irony is that Africans arguing homosexuality is un-African often use Western Biblical interpretations to substantiate the claim – when the Bible is not Africa's culture either (Khumalo 2018:267–270). Moreover, Zambia's founding philosophy, “One Zambia, One Nation”, embraces diversity and

accommodates all people regardless of race, creed, religion, or sex (Soko 2014:131–133; Kaunda 1974:xi).

Part three: Four disruptive narratives

Building on Müller’s (2017:92) African postfoundational practical theology, identifying dominant storylines is followed by “the development of alternative interpretations that point beyond the local community”. Disruptive narratives are technologies of resistance – creative interventions that interrupt harmful cycles (Van Jaarsveld 2022:242–243). Drawing on Ward (2017:103–104), they widen the table, complexify understanding, add depth, and confront issues with alternatives. Read through a cruciform theological lens, these narratives do more than offer alternatives to harmful masculinity: they reconfigure where power is located, shifting it from domination to vulnerability, mutuality, service, and shared dignity.

Crucially, disruptive narratives are not imported from Western scholarship. They emerge inductively from the data itself – from the stories respondents told, the practices they described, and the tensions they named. In my thesis, the fourth storyline – “Creative (Re)interpretations of Masculinity” – already contained these seeds (Van Jaarsveld 2022:270–276). Every single respondent referenced either Genesis 1:27 or Galatians 3:28. The RCZ ordained women in 2001. More men practise vulnerability in pastoral care. The task is amplification, not invention. The theological move in this article is therefore to draw these existing practices together as a cruciform alternative to dominance-fragility.

3.1 Disruptive narrative 1: Queer theology and African sexual diversity

What it disrupts:

The heteronormative enforcement documented in 2.4 – the criminalisation of same-sex relationships, the silencing of queer voices, and the exclusion of queer Zambians from full participation in church and society.

Where it is emerging:

Van Klinken (2019:4–5) documents that queer African Christians are reclaiming their faith, developing grassroots theologies affirming their

dignity. His study of queer Kenyans reveals that “queer Africans are not only victims of homophobia but also agents of resistance and creativity, producing new knowledges, new arts, and new theologies.”

Kaoma (2015:26–28) argues that queer theology “reclaims (and queers) pieces of scripture that have been hijacked by anti-queer interpretations to promote discrimination and exclusion.” Queer theology does not impose a “gay agenda.” It recognises what is already there: queer Zambian Christians who need the church to stop pretending they do not exist. The silence and hostility documented in my fieldwork are not neutral. They leave queer Zambians – who exist, despite the denial – without pastoral care, without theological affirmation, and often without family.

The claim that homosexuality is “un-African” is historically inaccurate. Precolonial Southern African societies knew and sometimes accommodated same-sex relations. The criminalisation of homosexuality, not African tradition, is a colonial import (Epprecht 2004, n.p.; Van Klinken & Phiri 2020:317–318). Queer inclusion is not a Western imposition; it is a return to authentic African humanism (Van Jaarsveld 2023:1–23).

Van Klinken (2021:5–22; 2024:357–375) argues that queer theology deconstructs the criteria prescribed by so-called “master frameworks” that come with rigid psychological and socio-cultural boundaries and hierarchies.

In my own research, the contrast between the church’s theological affirmations and its embodied exclusion was stark. As one respondent (R2_M) stated: “When I think about Jesus Christ... he never mistreated women. He regarded them as part of God’s image” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:145–146). This testimony points towards the theological lens developed in this article: Christ’s identity is not secured through the domination of others but disclosed in boundary-crossing solidarity. If the image of Christ relativises gender hierarchy, it also challenges the use of heterosexuality as a boundary for legitimate humanity. The same cruciform logic therefore presses the church to recognise queer Zambian Christians rather than treating them as the constitutive Other.

3.2 Disruptive narrative 2: New interpretations of male initiations

What it disrupts:

Traditional male initiations reinforce patriarchal scripts – boys are taught to be strong, not to cry, to dominate, and to suppress vulnerability. The practice of *lobola* (bride price) and child marriages installs the idea that women and girls have less worth than men – an idea prominent in the manosphere. As R10_F explained: “Before the marriage itself, a man pays something... Because I paid I have the right to beat her” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:164). These cultural inscriptions produce the very fragility they mask (Zulu 2015:93; Van Jaarsveld 2022:256–258).

Siwila (2022:42–51) identifies three types of masculinities in Zambia – traditional manliness, white-collar masculinity, and clerical hero masculinity – all of which install expectations that men who cannot meet them are failures. Van Klinken (2016:109–130) identifies “biblical manhood” as religiously endorsed patriarchy. Where clerical hero masculinity strives for dominion and biblical manhood demands self-control and headship, a new model is needed.

Where it is emerging:

The RCZ has already demonstrated a capacity for reform. When early missionaries found the Chewa *cinamwali* (female initiation) problematic – containing dancing, beer drinking, and praying to ancestors – they did not abolish initiation. Instead, they created the *cilangizo*, a Christian alternative focused on character-building, perseverance, and communal responsibility (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1982:84, 182–183).

Some RCZ congregations now experiment with men’s fellowships as ongoing formation rather than one-time rituals (Van Jaarsveld 2022:252–258). One respondent (R3_M) described a pastoral practice that functions as initiation into grief rather than stoicism: “In my time in ministry, I’ve learned – with experience – to allow someone to be broken. Whether it’s a man or a woman. They should be able to express emotional time, without pretending to be strong” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:145).

A contemporary African voice offers a concrete application. Phumlani Ngwenya, who spent time in Zambia as a missionary, states that he will not ask *lobola* for his daughter: “I refuse to let my daughter’s worth be reduced to negotiations over cows or cash. Her dignity is not something a man should purchase; it is something God gave her when He created her in His image” (Barnes & Ngwenya 2026:52). Ngwenya is not rejecting tradition – he is redefining it.

In neighbouring Malawi, Senior Chief Theresa Kachindamoto has annulled over 3 500 child marriages, stating: “I am not defying tradition. I am redefining it” (Flanagan 2019, e-resource; Paliani-Kamanga 2019, e-resource). Her words capture the essence of this disruptive narrative: tradition is not static. It can be transformed from within.

3.3 Disruptive narrative 3: The power of vulnerability

What it disrupts:

The cultural coding of vulnerability as feminine, weak, and shameful – which leads men to suppress emotions, avoid help-seeking, and “rather die than reveal feelings.” As R9_F stated: “If a man confronts a woman to say this is what I’m feeling, then he is considered to be a weak man. I would rather die than reveal these feelings to a lady” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:151). R4_M articulated the devastating consequences: “in case I fail to provide ... I may commit suicide; I may be depressed ... I may be forced to steal or commit a crime” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:144). The manosphere intensifies this script by valorising emotional control and stoicism as hallmarks of “alpha” masculinity (Connell 2005:77–81; Galla 2022, e-resource).

Where it is emerging:

Brown (2012:33–34) demonstrates that vulnerability – from Latin *vulnerare* (“capable of being wounded”) – is not weakness but the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. Avoiding vulnerability leads to “masking”: foreboding joy, perfectionism, and numbing (Brown 2012:39, 112, 117). These masks are trauma-inducing and can cause more fragility in the form of cynicism, criticism, and cruelty (Brown 2012:167). What the manosphere calls “strength” – the suppression of vulnerability – is actually a recipe for deeper fragility.

The contrast from my fieldwork could not be starker. R9_F reported that men are taught: “I would rather die than revealing these feelings.” But R3_M learned a different way: “In my time in ministry, I’ve learned – with experience – to allow someone to be broken. Whether it’s a man or a woman. They should be able to express emotional time, without pretending to be strong” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:145). When a man has lost his wife, R3_M tells him: “Take your time, look, and bid farewell to your wife here. Don’t rush on this one” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:145).

The difference is not simply personality; it is theology. R9_F’s interlocutors draw on a Christ who conquers – a Christ who can be made to fit the manosphere’s “alpha” mould. R3_M draws on a Christ who suffers – a Christ whose vulnerability on the cross is the revelation of God’s self-giving love. Moltmann’s theology of the cross (1974:36–39, 211–213, 255) provides the grounding: on the cross, God participates in human suffering. Van der Watt (2012:27) writes: “The ultimate power of masculinity thus ultimately lies in embodying vulnerability and mutual relationality, contesting unilateral and hierarchical relations.” This is the article’s central theological claim: cruciform masculinity interrupts the dominance-fragility cycle by refusing to make vulnerability the opposite of power.

During my fieldwork, the vulnerability of Jesus – his suffering, the cross, his death – was rarely mentioned. The emphasis fell on Jesus the Victor, the Powerful, the Healer (Van Jaarsveld 2022:158). As one field journal entry noted: “Good Friday was not a quiet day of reflection on the Cross... It is as though the vulnerability of the cross is overlooked. This is ironic, since African men, maybe even more than the average man, know the cost of suffering” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:158). A theology that embraces vulnerability does not import weakness into African Christianity. It names what is already true: suffering is real, men experience it, and the cross permits them to admit it. In this sense, the cross is not merely another theological image in the article; it is the interpretive lens through which the dominance-fragility cycle is critically re-read.

3.4 Disruptive narrative 4: The Lord's table as radical equaliser

What it disrupts:

The gap between theological affirmation (“created in God’s image”; “neither male nor female”) and embodied practice (gender discrimination, women’s marginalisation in church leadership). Every respondent referenced either Genesis 1:27 or Galatians 3:28 when discussing gender equality (Van Jaarsveld 2022:271–274). Yet women reverends report feeling unwelcome, overlooked, and required to “prove a point” constantly.

R10_F described her experience:

“I do get an impression sometimes that my presence ... people still have – and some of my fellow male ministers still have – mixed feelings. They still find it difficult to accommodate ... It’s like you are in this open space where all eyes are on you” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:160).

R7_F added: “When a woman takes up a leadership role, men would not want to listen, or to respect, or to follow whatever instruction comes from the woman” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:159).

Where it is emerging:

Patterson (2018:14, 158) argues that Galatians 3:26–28 was the first Christian creed – a radical social vision that erased hierarchies of race, class, and gender:

“There is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male and female” was not about overcoming difference for the sake of sameness. It was about overcoming the distinctions that commonly underwrite the human tendency to denigrate the other, to disempower, disenfranchise, dehumanise, and even enslave another person because he or she is different. It was about denying a caste system.

The Lord’s Table (Eucharist) is where this creed becomes material. Van der Walt (2020:11–12, 19) argues that the Table levels the field – an equaliser where no discrimination is allowed. Watson (2002:89–100) adds that the Table is political: it reclaims women’s bodies, empowers women to speak, and requires men to listen.

R2_M articulated the theological shift:

“When I think about Jesus Christ, I am always confronted with the question: What did he do? Jesus Christ, being a man, never mistreated women. He regarded them as part of God’s image... That is why women were involved in his ministry. Previously, we did not ordain women. So why should we segregate them?” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:145–146).

The RCZ ordained its first woman, Reverend Rose Molowa, on 7 January 2001 (Van Jaarsveld 2022:96). At the time I concluded my research (2022), 18 of the 162 RCZ ministers were women, and 4 of the 33 full-time evangelists were women (Van Jaarsveld 2022:96). Women are increasingly pursuing theological studies; despite the adversity they face.

These numbers are not evidence of equality achieved. They are evidence that the Table is being stretched – slowly, unevenly, against resistance. But every time a woman presides at communion, she performs the creed: “there is neither male nor female.” The task is to move this realisation from statement to sacrament – to make the Table a lived practice of equality.

Part four: Analysis and response to the manosphere

The four disruptive narratives above offer alternatives. But what do they tell us about the manosphere itself?

4.1 The fragility of manosphere power

The power dynamics within the manosphere are inherently fragile. This fragility is not rooted in the weaknesses of individual participants but is a structural characteristic of the system itself (Van Jaarsveld 2022:266–267). Influencers rely heavily on digital platforms for their visibility. When these platforms act – banning or restricting content – prominent figures can lose their reach rapidly. Recent scholarship likewise shows that the contemporary manosphere is shaped by platform migration, recommender systems, influencer culture, and monetisation (Gerrand et al. 2025:445–448). The point is not that Zambian church masculinities derive from these digital systems. It is that the comparison exposes a shared structural

problem: masculine authority that must continually be performed is authority that is never secure.

Beyond platform dependency, the manosphere's internal logic reveals a fundamental contradiction. The movement promises that any man can become "alpha." But if every man attains this position, the concept loses its meaning. "Alpha" exists only in relation to "beta" – those who are dominated. Without this hierarchy, the distinction collapses. Connell (2005:76–81) notes that hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal accessible to very few. The system's power therefore depends on most men failing to embody the ideal. This is precisely where the dominance-fragility cycle becomes the article's organising contribution: a system that defines masculine worth through dominance necessarily produces insecurity among those who cannot sustain that performance.

Judith Butler (1999:43–44, 174–175) explains that gender is performative – a repeated series of acts. To maintain the "alpha" identity, individuals must continually perform: showcasing wealth, undergoing physical transformations, boasting about sexual prowess, and delivering misogynistic rhetoric. The performance never ends because the identity has no foundation. Zulu (2015:86–87) likens this to African masks: outwardly powerful, but hollow. Van der Watt (2016:1–9) observes that the obsession with being "big, hard, and up" reveals the fear of being "small, soft, and down."

4.2 The manosphere's anti-gay foundation: Structural, not incidental

The manosphere's hostility toward homosexuality is not merely incidental to its misogyny. It can function as a mechanism of boundary-making through which legitimate masculinity is defined against queer identities. Coulling (2020: n.p.) describes this as "emotional border work" – constructing walls around legitimate masculinity by excluding queer identities as fundamentally unmanly. Recent scholarship also identifies ideological overlap between male supremacist, anti-trans, and other reactionary online discourses (Gerrand et al. 2025:451–452).

Empirical evidence supports this analysis. Farrell, Fernandez, Novotny and Alani (2019:88) analysed six million posts across Reddit's manosphere communities and found that homophobic language ranks alongside

physical violence, sexual violence, and racism as a core category of extremist rhetoric within the ecosystem.

Critically, Jones, Trott and Wright (2020:1903) observe that the manosphere does not typically present its anti-gay positions as explicit hatred. Instead, MGTOW rhetoric frames them as “common sense” – rational, logical responses to a culture that has become “too soft” or “too feminine.” This framing is precisely what makes the ideology dangerous. Young men who are earnestly seeking answers to masculine anxiety encounter homophobia packaged as reasonable critique, not as bigotry.

What emerges is a closed ideological loop. The manosphere promises men a path to secure, dominant masculinity, yet that security depends on maintaining boundaries between the “real man” and those positioned outside it. The comparison with RCZ masculinities is therefore structural rather than causal. My fieldwork cannot show that anti-gay attitudes in the RCZ were transmitted from online manosphere communities; it shows instead that both systems can use heterosexuality as a boundary for masculine legitimacy. This makes queer inclusion a theological test of any alternative masculinity.

4.3 The shadow side is not a glitch

The manosphere presents its “shadow side” – the men who fail, who cannot achieve the alpha ideal, who turn to violence or suicide – as individual failures. But this interpretation is mistaken. The manosphere is not a set of bad actors. It is a network of power relations that produces the very outcomes it claims to oppose (Van Jaarsveld 2022:266–267).

The instability of manosphere power is also visible in its dependence on platforms, audiences, and performance. Recent research shows that algorithms can repeatedly re-amplify manosphere content even after prominent accounts are removed, while influencer culture turns visibility itself into a resource (Gerrand et al. 2025:445–448). The same system that produces authority can therefore withdraw it. This is another form of the dominance-fragility contradiction: power has to be continually performed because it is never finally possessed.

But the more fundamental problem is this: if being a man is dependent on being a father, a leader, strong, able-bodied, and successful, then the

majority of men are immediately rejected by the system. Those who are disabled, poor, without a job, uneducated, cannot have children, identify as gay, or struggle with mental health issues – all are excluded from the “alpha” ideal before they even begin. The manosphere does not offer these men a path to liberation. It tells them they are failures by definition.

Becoming an “alpha” is an unrealistic ideal. Even those who achieve power often lose it. The manosphere’s heroes are one scandal, one loss of platform away from irrelevance. The category “alpha” has no meaning without “betas” to dominate. If every man became alpha, no man would be alpha. The hierarchy flattens. The manosphere would have nothing to sell.

My research in Zambia found ordinary men trapped in a related logic, although not within a demonstrably manosphere network. R4_M spoke of suicide and depression when he could not meet the expectation to provide (Van Jaarsveld 2022:144). R9_F spoke of men who would “rather die than reveal feelings” (Van Jaarsveld 2022:151). These testimonies are not evidence of manosphere influence. They are evidence of a pre-existing masculine order in which dominance is prescribed and failure becomes shame. The contemporary manosphere is analytically useful because it makes this same structure unusually explicit and commercially reproducible.

4.4 What the cycle reveals

The dominance-fragility cycle, which emerged as the central heuristic of my doctoral research, exposes a structural contradiction that becomes clearer in dialogue with contemporary manosphere scholarship (Van Jaarsveld 2022:263–267; Gerrand et al. 2025:447–448). The table below summarises the contradiction between what a dominance-based masculinity promises and what the cycle actually produces.

Manosphere claim	What the cycle reveals
<i>“You are fragile because you have lost power. Take back your power through dominance.”</i>	The effort to maintain dominance is itself the source of fragility. The more a man must prove he is strong, the more aware he becomes that he might fail (Van Jaarsveld 2022:264–265).

<i>“Vulnerability is weakness. Suppress it.”</i>	When a man suppresses his feelings, he cannot seek help. He cannot grieve. He cannot admit he is struggling. He suffers alone. Sometimes he dies (Van Jaarsveld 2022:151, 266).
<i>“Women cannot be trusted. They will exploit your vulnerability.”</i>	When a man treats his wife as a possession rather than a partner, he loses the possibility of genuine intimacy. The “good life” becomes an impossible burden (Van Jaarsveld 2022:164; Elphick 2012:71–72).
<i>“The ‘alpha’ is untouchable. He controls everything.”</i>	The performance of untouchability is itself a confession of fear. The man who must constantly prove he is in control is, by definition, not in control. His power depends entirely on others believing the performance (Van Jaarsveld 2022:266–267).
<i>“Optimise your body. Become the alpha.”</i>	Constant self-optimisation creates new forms of failure. A man is never muscular enough, tall enough, or symmetrical enough. The body becomes a project that can never be completed.
<i>“Real men are heterosexual. Homosexuality is a corruption.”</i>	The enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality harms not only queer people but also heterosexual men who cannot live up to the hypersexualised ideal. It forecloses the possibility of intimate male friendships, of emotional honesty between men, of vulnerability in male spaces (Van Klinken 2016:111–112; Van Jaarsveld 2022:165, 200–201; Van Jaarsveld 2023:3–5, 10–11).

The cycle is not a description of individual failure. It is a systemic contradiction: the pursuit of masculine security through dominance continually generates the fragility that dominance is supposed to cure. This is the central contribution of the present article. The manosphere does not cause the Zambian cycle, and the Zambian data do not prove manosphere influence. Rather, the comparison reveals the same underlying logic in two

different contexts and allows the Zambian theological alternatives to speak directly to a contemporary global phenomenon.

4.5 Ubuntu and Zambian humanism – Healthier masculinities

What the manosphere lacks, and what African traditions and the best resources within African Christianity can offer, is a vision of interdependence. *Ubuntu*, often summarised as “I am because we are”, teaches that a person becomes a person through other people. As Chitando (2015:269–283) argues, ubuntu challenges the individualism that underlies the manosphere and replaces it with relationality and mutual responsibility. A man who lives ubuntu does not need to dominate because his worth is not measured by dominance over others but by contribution to community. Read alongside the cruciform lens, ubuntu gives concrete African language to a theology in which relationality rather than hierarchy becomes the basis of masculine dignity.

Zambia has its own expression of this philosophy. Kenneth Kaunda’s Zambian Humanism, under the motto “One Zambia, One Nation,” fosters a country where there should be no divisions on the grounds of race, colour, creed, tribe, religion, or sex (Kaunda 1974:xi; Soko 2014:131–133). As Soko argues, Zambian Humanism embraces diversity and accommodates marginalised groups. It is radical inclusivity as state policy.

These resources are not abstract ideals. They are already being lived. In neighbouring Malawi, Senior Chief Theresa Kachindamoto annulled over 3,500 child marriages and successfully lobbied parliament to raise the marriage age to 18. She stated: “I am not defying tradition. I am redefining it” (Flanagan 2019, e-resource; Paliani-Kamanga 2019, e-resource).

Fighting the manosphere directly would be a mistake. It would take too much energy and would amplify the very content we oppose. As Odanga Madung notes, “it’s not about telling young people what not to look at. It’s about creating alternative content that offers a different vision of masculinity” (Okiror 2026, e-resource). The alternatives are already growing in African soil: in the RCZ’s ordination of women, in pastoral practices that allow men to grieve, in ubuntu and Zambian Humanism, in chiefs who redefine tradition rather than abandoning it.

The dominance-fragility cycle is not inevitable. Alternative masculinities are already emerging – in Lusaka, in Lilongwe, in Nairobi, in Johannesburg. The manosphere exploits loneliness, insecurity, and economic precarity and offers dominance as a cure for fragility. But the cure reproduces the condition it claims to solve. The practical task for churches is therefore not simply to warn young men against online influencers. It is to cultivate communities in which men can belong without performing dominance: communities of vulnerability, mutual accountability, shared leadership, and embodied equality.

Conclusion

The manosphere's algorithms are powerful. They exploit and monetise forms of masculine insecurity, while offering dominance and self-optimisation as individual solutions to structural problems (Gerrand et al. 2025:447–448, 453–454). But the dominance-fragility cycle, which emerged from my research in Zambia, exposes a deeper contradiction: the more masculine worth is secured through dominance, the more fragile that worth becomes. The “alpha” is not a stable identity. It is a performance that requires constant validation and an audience of others against whom the self can be measured. The central argument of this article is therefore not that the manosphere produced the masculinities I encountered in the RCZ. Rather, the contemporary manosphere makes visible, in a new digital and commercial form, a structural logic already present in the Zambian data.

The alternative is not simply a different set of prescriptions. It is a different way of being human. In the RCZ, some men practise vulnerability. Some women endure suspicion to claim their ministry. Chiefs like Senior Chief Theresa Kachindamoto redefine tradition rather than abandoning it. These are not Western imports. They are African practices that contest hierarchy from within. Read through a cruciform theological lens, they suggest that Christian masculinity need not be secured through domination at all.

The cross offers a different path: vulnerability as strength, service as power, love as the measure of a life. The Eucharistic Table makes this theology social and embodied: Galatians 3:28 becomes not merely a creed to affirm but a practice in which hierarchy is interrupted, and all are invited to

participate. Ubuntu offers a parallel grammar of relationality, while Zambian Humanism offers a local language of shared belonging through “One Zambia, One Nation.” Together, these resources do not provide a generic African alternative; they sharpen a practical-theological claim about the kind of church required to interrupt the dominance-fragility cycle.

That is the good news that the manosphere’s algorithms will never recommend: masculine dignity need not be purchased through domination, and vulnerability need not be treated as failure. For the RCZ and other Zambian churches, the practical challenge is to make this alternative visible in preaching, pastoral care, leadership, men’s formation, and the Table. The task is not to invent a new masculinity from outside. It is to amplify the disruptive practices already present within African Christian communities and to organise them around a cruciform vision of power.

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