

INITIATION: A DEADLY GENDERED LICENCE TO UNFAIR PATRIARCHAL DIVIDENDS TO HIGH SCHOOL XHOSA YOUNG MEN

INICIAÇÃO: UMA PRÁTICA MORTÍFERA DE GÊNERO QUE CONCEDE DIVIDENDOS PATRIARCALMENTE INJUSTOS AOS JOVENS DO SEXO MASCULINO DA ETNIA XHOSA DO ENSINO MÉDIO

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, unfair gender-biased practices that yield patriarchal dividends should have been eradicated in democratic societies worldwide. In South Africa, one of the most respected countries for its world-class Constitution, Xhosa young men continue to receive socially sanctioned preferential treatment over women, uninitiated peers, and non-conformist learners, especially in high schools in the Eastern Cape Province, where the Xhosa clan originates. This study explored the forms of gendered patriarchal dividends, their detrimental effects within high school settings, and possible strategies for mitigation. Framed by Connell's (1995) Theory of Masculinities and situated within a constructivist paradigm, this qualitative study utilised individual and group interviews to generate data from purposively selected initiated Xhosa learners at a high school in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The findings indicate that initiated learners openly reject familiar forms of address from female and uninitiated peers, challenge authority, and prefer segregation from them within the school environment, thereby undermining SDG 05 (Gender Equality). Furthermore, initiated learners deliberately deviate from the prescribed school uniform by wearing specific colours and regalia associated with initiated men, coerce female learners into performing chores on their behalf, pressure uninitiated and non-conformist peers to undergo initiation, and engage in risky behaviours that reinforce patriarchal power structures. The persistence of these practices signals the need for significant societal reform. Efforts toward gender equality must begin with shifts in mindset, particularly among academics, before extending to educational institutions and, ultimately, to society at large.

Resumo

No século XXI, práticas injustas baseadas em preconceitos de gênero que geram dividendos patriarcais deveriam ter sido erradicadas nas sociedades democráticas em todo o mundo. Na África do Sul, um dos países mais respeitados por sua Constituição de nível internacional, os jovens do clã xhosa continuam a receber tratamento preferencial socialmente sancionado em detrimento das mulheres, de colegas não iniciados e de alunos não conformistas, especialmente nas escolas de ensino médio da Província do Cabo Oriental, onde o clã xhosa é originário. Este estudo explorou as formas de dividendos patriarcais de gênero, seus efeitos prejudiciais no ambiente escolar do ensino médio e possíveis estratégias para sua mitigação. Enquadrado pela Teoria das Masculinidades de Connell (1995) e situado dentro de um paradigma construtivista, este estudo qualitativo utilizou entrevistas individuais e em grupo para gerar dados a partir de alunos xhosas iniciados, selecionados propositalmente, em uma escola de ensino médio na Província do Cabo Oriental, África do Sul. Os resultados indicam que os alunos iniciados rejeitam abertamente formas familiares de tratamento por parte de colegas do sexo feminino e não iniciados, desafiam a autoridade e preferem a segregação em relação a elas no ambiente escolar, minando assim o ODS 05 (Igualdade de Gênero). Além disso, os alunos iniciados se desviam deliberadamente do uniforme escolar prescrito ao usar cores e trajés específicos associados a homens iniciados, coagem alunas a realizar tarefas em seu nome, pressionam colegas não iniciados e não conformistas a se submeterem à iniciação e se envolvem em comportamentos de risco que reforçam as estruturas de poder patriarcais. A persistência dessas práticas sinaliza a



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Masculinities. Patriarchal Dividends.
Hegemony. Non-Conformists.

necessidade de uma reforma social significativa. Os esforços em prol da igualdade de gênero devem começar com mudanças de mentalidade, particularmente entre os acadêmicos, antes de se estenderem às instituições de ensino e, por fim, à sociedade em geral.

Palavras-chave: Iniciação. Circuncisão.
Masculinidades. Dividendos Patriarcais.
Hegemonia. Não Conformistas.

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Initiation (*Ulwaluko*), a rite of passage for Xhosa young males, publicly marks the transition from boyhood to manhood. In school contexts, this transition reshapes social hierarchies and everyday interactions. The rite is practised for health, cultural, identity, and spiritual purposes (Mpateni & Kang'ethe, 2021). As part of the rite, boys' foreskins are surgically removed through a circumcision procedure performed by Xhosa attendants (*amakhankatha*) under the strict supervision of an experienced and respected leader (*ingcibi*). Permission must be obtained from government officials, local leaders, and cultural custodians to conduct the process in officially recognised Xhosa initiation schools or centres. However, the ritual has increasingly been exploited by unscrupulous individuals who perform the procedure illegally in unregulated initiation schools.

Anthropological and gender studies literature frame Xhosa male initiation as a rite of passage that confers masculine status, social capital, and authority, which scholars describe as patriarchal dividends that reward initiates with elevated social standing and control (Morrell, 2001; Vincent, 2008). Local narratives of manhood, such as responsibility, authority, and sexual competence, are taught during initiation and subsequently enacted in communities and school settings subsequently undermining Sustainable Development Goal 05 (Gender Equity) (Magodyo *et al.*, 2017). Diko (2025) argues that initiated Xhosa young men in high schools gain distinct patriarchal rewards, including perceived moral legitimacy, enhanced social status, authority over peers, leadership roles, sexual licence, and access to male networks. Additionally, this gendered ritual has been associated with social benefits that may condone risky behaviour and suppress attempts to question or resist the process (Morrell, 2001). In the Eastern Cape

specifically, studies indicate that the ritual continues to provide considerable patriarchal advantages that sustain harmful practices (Ellis & Jubase, 2024; eNCA, 2025). Recent seasonal reports document numerous fatalities and hundreds of hospitalisations linked to the ritual (India Today World Desk, 2025; Legit.ng, 2025). Regional investigations further confirm that morbidity and mortality associated with initiation practices persist as an ongoing public health issue rather than a sporadic seasonal occurrence (eNCA, 2025). Consequently, initiation emerges as both a cultural institution and a significant public health concern.

In the South African context, high school learners comprise those in the Senior Phase (Grades 8–9), typically aged 13–15 years, and the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10–12), typically aged 15–19 years. It is imperative to understand what compels Xhosa young men in these high schools to risk their health, bodily integrity, education, and even their lives to undergo traditional initiation, sometimes performed by illegal attendants in unregulated schools under hazardous conditions. These young men have the option to complete their secondary education and reach greater physical and emotional maturity before enduring the pain and hardships associated with this rite of passage. However, patriarchal dividends, among other factors, appear to function as a push-and-pull force that compels them to pursue initiation as early as age 13 (Grade 8).

There is a notable evidence gap regarding rigorous interventions that can foster equity, safeguard freedom of choice, and ensure the safety of all learners in high schools. This paper aimed to examine the forms of patriarchal dividends conferred by the initiation rite, particularly among Xhosa young men in high school, and to explore alternative interventions. Accordingly, the research question guiding this study was: ‘What forms of patriarchal dividends are conferred by the initiation rite on Xhosa young men in high school, and what alternative interventions could be implemented?’

Framed within Connell’s (1995) Theory of Masculinities and situated within the constructivist paradigm, this exploratory qualitative study utilised individual and group interviews to generate data from ten purposively selected initiated Xhosa young men at a high school in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesises gendered cultural analyses of Xhosa initiation (*ulwaluko*), with particular emphasis on the forms of patriarchal social dividends that encourage school-age boys to hasten their participation in the rite, alongside epidemiological and clinical reports.

2.1 Cultural meaning and forms of patriarchal dividends in high school settings

Anthropological and gender scholarship emphasises that initiation is not merely a surgical act but a rite of passage that confers masculine status, social capital, and authority, what critics term patriarchal dividends (Morrell, 2001; Mpateni & Kang'ethe, 2021; Vincent, 2008). According to Vincent (2008), these social returns anchor a strong collective desire among individuals, families, and communities to sustain traditional initiation practices despite widely documented risks. These returns are understood to shape young men's behaviour and expectations following initiation.

The literature identifies several forms of patriarchal gains conferred by the initiation rite on high school young men. First, elevated social status and respect (Ngcobo, 2013), whereby initiated learners are routinely treated as adults by peers and, in some cases, teachers, receiving deference and symbolic recognition that enhances their standing within the school community. Second, authority and disciplinary power (Ngcobo, 2013), where initiates may acquire informal authority to police younger boys' behaviour, enforce gender norms, and assume leadership roles in sports teams, boarding houses, or peer groups. This authority can translate into broader influence over school norms. Third, sexual licence and altered expectations (Magodyo *et al.*, 2017), in which initiation is associated with expectations of heterosexual prowess and entitlement, thereby increasing social pressure and, at times, risky sexual behaviour among initiated learners. Fourth, access to male networks and patronage (Diko, 2025), whereby initiation establishes or strengthens male-only networks, including older initiates, elders, and traditional leaders, that provide social capital, protection, and opportunities. Such advantages may persist into late adolescence. Finally, moral legitimacy and exclusionary identity (Mdokwana, 2024), where initiated status is framed as morally and culturally superior in certain

contexts, legitimising the exclusion of non-initiated boys and reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies within school life.

2.2 Recent epidemiology and clinical harms reports

Data indicate that unsafe traditional initiation procedures remain a preventable source of adolescent male morbidity and mortality (Elmi *et al.*, 2025; Obeng *et al.*, 2026; Peltzer *et al.*, 2008). Seasonal media and provincial reports from 2024–2025 document repeated clusters of deaths and severe complications among initiates in the Eastern Cape. For example, 20 deaths were reported by 22 December 2025, with nearly 200 hospitalisations and multiple arrests linked to illegal initiation schools (eNCA, 2025). Earlier investigative reporting recorded 34 deaths during the 2023–2024 season, identifying dehydration, infection, and delayed access to emergency care as recurrent causes (Ellis & Jubase, 2024).

Both classical and recent studies document persistent clinical complications associated with traditional initiation, many of which are preventable through medical circumcision (Lucas *et al.*, 2020; Shabanzadeh *et al.*, 2021; Peltzer *et al.*, 2008). These include severe injuries and infections, such as amputations and sepsis (Lucas *et al.*, 2020; Shabanzadeh *et al.*, 2021; Peltzer *et al.*, 2008). In response to these complications, the South African government intensified its regulatory and monitoring frameworks (South African National Department of Health, 2014). Despite stricter regulations, improved law enforcement, and greater involvement of community leadership, significant implementation gaps persist, particularly in rural areas where most initiation activities occur (eNCA, 2025). Interventions by the Department of Health that focus solely on clinical safety are unlikely to be effective without addressing the social and cultural benefits that sustain the ritual.

Among many young Xhosa men, the initiation rite remains a firmly established cultural practice that continues to command strong social support despite widely documented associated risks. Studies suggest that male circumcision reduces the likelihood of contracting HIV by approximately 50–60%, as well as lowering the risk of other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) (Gostin & Hankins, 2008; WHO, 2008, 2020). The supporting evidence derives from large-scale randomised controlled trials

conducted across several sub-Saharan African countries, which demonstrated that medical male circumcision (MMC) reduces heterosexual HIV transmission risk in men by approximately 50–60% (Gazimbi, 2019).

These findings informed recommendations by the WHO and UNAIDS to expand access to MMC services (Auvert *et al.*, 2005; WHO, 2008, 2020). In response, South Africa emphasised clinical safety, task-sharing, and rigorous quality assurance within MMC initiatives, collaborating with traditional leaders to develop policies that align medical practices with cultural customs (South African National Department of Health, 2014). This approach has resulted in a dual policy strategy that promotes medically supervised circumcision while simultaneously reinforcing regulatory oversight of traditional practices (South African National Department of Health, 2014). However, circumcision constitutes only one component of initiation. Initiation schools encompass broader social and cultural processes that continue to attract young men. The perceived social gains associated with initiation may be considered to outweigh the potential risks.

3 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative exploratory approach to examine how Xhosa male initiation rituals shape the social and cultural experiences of high school learners. A case study methodology was selected to enable an in-depth examination of these dynamics, with data drawn from a single school in order to situate the findings within a broader educational context. The study included ten Xhosa boys who had recently returned from initiation schools. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Data were collected through semi-structured individual and group interviews, which encouraged participants to reflect on their personal experiences, expectations, and perceptions of initiated young men within their school setting. Additional contextual insights were drawn from national and local media coverage of initiation-related incidents, as well as from observational notes recorded during the study. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and interpretations across interview responses. Content analysis was

further applied to literature, media sources, and observational notes to triangulate and corroborate the qualitative findings.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that initiated learners openly refused familiar forms of address and challenged the authority of female peers. The findings further indicated that the ritual fostered segregation, the formation of gendered groups, and the exclusion of female, non-initiated, and non-conformist learners. The study also established that initiated learners deliberately deviated from the prescribed school uniform, demanding permission to wear regalia or display symbols that signified their newly acquired public status. Additionally, initiated learners were found to coerce female peers into performing chores on their behalf and to exert pressure on non-initiated boys and non-conformists to undergo initiation. The findings suggest that initiation functions as a catalyst for risky gendered behaviour that reinforces patriarchal power structures.

4.1 Refusal of familiar forms of address and challenge to the opposite authority

Initiated learners' behaviour changes drastically immediately after they return to school following the initiation. Many of them demand to be treated differently, including being addressed as "Boet," "Mr," "sir," or "by Surname". Enhle said, *"Since I'm a man now, I cannot allow boys and girls to call me by my name. Even teachers must respect me."* Okuhle emphasised, *"I think it is important that teachers have some reservations when it comes to us as initiated men. Although we are all learners, we are different. We are in a different category. We should be respected as initiated men,"* Abongile added *"Yes, teachers should treat us with respect, and that is according to our culture. We have to be respected as adults."* In addition, these initiated young men openly challenge authority and discipline, particularly from female teachers. Aphiwe added, *"Teachers, especially female teachers, should not shout at us or discipline us in the presence of girls and uninitiated boys"*. Their open refusal to be addressed by their official first names, coupled with explicit objections to authority, particularly from female teachers, serves as an intentional expression of their perceived newly acquired superiority. This deliberate

behaviour distinguishes these young men from their uninitiated male peers and female learners, while simultaneously asserting adult status in relation to teachers, especially female teachers. The construction of masculinities, deeply embedded in the initiation process, grants initiates elevated social recognition and contributes to the reshaping of their identities. Within this context, initiated learners often expressed heightened expectations of respect, consistent with findings that Xhosa young men who have completed initiation expect to be regarded and treated “as men” upon returning to school (Ngcobo, 2013).

Such status assertions may challenge institutional authority, disrupt classroom management, compromise equity, and reinforce dominant masculine hierarchies. Similarly, other studies have demonstrated that newly initiated men may display attitudes and behaviours that impede educational progress (Nomngcoyiya & Kang’ethe, 2021).

4.2 Segregation, grouping, and exclusion

Segregation, grouping, and exclusion in classroom settings and school grounds often arise when initiated learners refuse to be associated with the opposite-sex or uninitiated peers. This practice institutionalises gendered and initiation-based divisions and diminishes opportunities for mixed-gender collaboration. Abongile, among others, was extremely critical of associating with uninitiated boys, drawing a clear line: *“I sit with men, not boys. I do not play with boys; I associate with young men. We talk ‘men things’ to each other.”* Concurring with Abongile, Enhle said, *“I would like to spend time with initiated men at break time. If you are an initiated man, you should spend time with men, not boys. What can you learn from boys?”* These forms of separation do more than reproduce patriarchal hierarchies; they also erode social cohesion by fostering peer groups that develop distinct identities, often in ways that resist school norms and make inclusive learning more difficult. According to Ball (1995), Churcher and Talbot (2020), and Stacey and Mockler (2020), dividing learners on the basis of initiation status, gender, social preference, or academic ability reinforces existing inequalities, fosters exclusionary behaviours, and limits exposure to diverse perspectives in educational environments. There is substantial evidence that gender segregation reduces interaction between female and male learners, thereby adversely affecting participation, engagement,

and academic achievement (Harris, 2020; Nussbaum, 2019). Similarly, segregating boys who have not undergone initiation, as well as non-conformist learners, creates significant pressure to conform prematurely or reluctantly, thereby obstructing the development of supportive and inclusive classroom environments (Ervin *et al.*, 2018). This urgency underscores the need to promote structured peer-support systems and intentional mixed-group approaches that enhance equitable participation and mitigate the detrimental effects of segregation in schools.

4.3 Uniform deviation and regalia as public markers of status

Wearing particular colours and ceremonial attire becomes a visible way of signalling a moral and social order that sets initiated young men apart from those who have not yet undergone the rite. The practice extends to the school settings, where initiated learners try everything possible to deviate from the regular school uniform to show their newly acquired status. This may indirectly imply that status gained through initiation ritual carries more weight than the school's authority. For example, Ayanda stated, *"I would like to dress in our traditional clothes. They show the stage that you are at. They are essential to us"*. Concurring with Ayanda, Abongile said, *"At least they should allow us to wear navata hats at school"*. In Xhosa culture, the initiation journey concludes with a symbolic act in which old clothing is burned and replaced with new, formal attire that marks the individual's shift to a higher social standing (Ulwaluko, n.d.). When these newly acquired status symbols are worn or displayed in a school environment, they disrupt school discipline and promote differentiation and inequalities. Displaying such symbols in school alters the appearance of initiated learners, creating feelings of intimidation or inadequacy among learners who haven't undergone the initiation process, thereby worsening inequalities in the classroom and the entire school. According to Batchelder & Mali (2024), clothing and symbols associated with initiation go beyond signalling maturity; they actively shape identity, behaviour, and learning by operating as indigenous knowledge systems that build a sense of belonging, teach values, and strengthen character. However, this practice poses a threat and discomfort to uninitiated peers. For example, Yando rejected the addition or display of cultural symbols to the school uniform, saying, *"The school should not allow initiated men to wear*

traditional attire or traditional symbols at school. All girls will opt for those who are dressed in traditional attire. So, uniform is good; we will be the same. Also, girls laugh at boys who are not initiated. Initiated boys take uninitiated boys' girlfriends. So, there will be a lot of fights”.

4.4 Coercing peers to do chores on their behalf and pushing young boys to go for initiation

Compelling opposite sex and uninitiated peer learners to do class chores on their behalf is a form of everyday coercion that reproduces patriarchal dividends, material, and symbolic benefits that accrue within patriarchal structures (Connell, 1995; Lee, 2025). Okuhle explained, *“We tell girls and uninitiated boys to do things like cleaning in class. We can't clean; we are men, girls and boys who do all those things for us. We tell them to tell teachers that we were also working.”* The practice reported in the school is indicative of entrenched patriarchal ideologies that persistently influence gendered power dynamics in South African educational settings (Coetzee, 2001). Initiated learners use a variety of strategies, including derogatory statements, persuasion, and exclusion, to push uninitiated boys to undergo initiation, regardless of whether they are interested or ready. For instance, Ayanda said, *“A boy who does not want to go for initiation is a coward; he lacks knowledge; he does not want to grow and to be a man.”* Okuhle added, *“A person who does not want to go there is a coward. Going up there is the right thing to do, but some people may fear for their lives.”* He continued, *“I will always advise them to go because it is done. If they don't go, I will treat them like boys, because they do not have the experiences that I have.”* Such conduct raises serious concerns around learners' safety and the potential for bullying, as the pressure and coercion seen in school settings can reflect broader patterns of gendered power and dominance described in research on hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou, 2001). These perceptions and behaviours raise serious concerns regarding other learners' safety, coercion, exploitation, bullying and

protection, which resonate from gendered domination identified in studies on hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou, 2001).

4.5 Risky gendered behaviour that reinforces patriarchal power

The initiation ritual operates as a significant institutional mechanism for embedding young men within a hegemonic gender hierarchy, thereby reinforcing patriarchal structures and conferring elevated status upon initiates relative to their non-initiated and non-conformist peers. This conferred benefit aligns with Connell's (1995) concept of "patriarchal dividends," whereby individuals are positioned advantageously within gendered power structures and accrue unearned social, material, and symbolic benefits. Ethnographic studies on African masculinities further suggest that undergoing the ritual signifies readiness for adult social recognition. In this sense, the process functions as an institutionalised point of entry into hegemonic masculinity, a socially legitimised ideal of dominant manhood that normalises male authority and sustains systemic gender inequity. Young men who are initiated frequently report increased social capital within school contexts, including heightened attention from female peers and the assumption of informal leadership roles (Ngcobo, 2013).

These enhancements in social standing within educational environments are presented as a direct consequence of initiation. Consequently, the ritual produces a form of gendered authority that positions many participants within a hegemonic masculinity framework that defines the "real man" and prescribes access to gendered power. This embedded status may encourage behaviours that reinforce patriarchal dominance, particularly within sexual relationships (Mshweshwe, 2024; Kilgallen, 2025). A study by Nalukwago *et al.* (2018) describes engagement in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships not merely as an individual choice, but as socially pressured conduct intended to demonstrate maturity and masculine competence. For instance, when asked about the number of girlfriends they had, participants offered responses such as: "Four," "Two," "Four girlfriends," and "About five or six, among them, there is a 'real' one. If you have a problem with the other one, you don't have to start afresh looking for another one; it makes things easy for you." Another participant asserted, "I am a real man." When asked

why they maintained multiple concurrent relationships, one participant retorted, “*Only one wheel?*”

These narratives illustrate two interconnected domains of patriarchal privilege: sexual entitlement and peer-pressure-driven validation, both normalised and rewarded within male peer circles. Within this socially affirmed ecology, young girls are positioned instrumentally as resources through which masculine identities are validated and reinforced. According to Connor *et al.* (2021) and Wong and Wang (2022), this dynamic aligns with the concept of instrumental masculinities. In this context, girls are reduced to symbolic markers used to sustain and reproduce patriarchal structures.

Despite widespread awareness of health risks associated with Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), including HIV, as well as potential long-term complications, many participants continue to engage in these practices. This suggests that even health-compromising behaviours may function as performances of masculinity, reinforcing dominant social norms despite the personal risks involved. Patriarchal frameworks endure precisely because dominance is continually reproduced, sometimes at high personal cost.

Therefore, initiation contributes to codifying distinctions among male peers, consolidating initiated learners’ privileges within educational spaces, and intensifying the objectification of young girls in school environments where informal hierarchies intersect with formal authority structures. Ultimately, the ritual operates as a gendered licence that naturalises and perpetuates inequality, legitimises male supremacy, and exposes both young men and girls to physical and psychological harm. Notably, current school policies often lack empirically grounded strategies to mitigate the unequal social capital conferred upon initiated learners. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated interventions by school and community leaders to cultivate safer, SUBMITTED more equitable learning environments.

5 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The impact of the Xhosa initiation ritual extends beyond communal life into schooling environments. Its role in constructing masculine identity appears to generate tensions for female, uninitiated, and non-conforming learners. The study highlights how

the ritual reinforces behaviours that challenge institutional authority and discriminate against female, uninitiated, and non-conforming learners, thereby undermining efforts to promote equality and threatening the safety and autonomy of others within the school community. The findings also indicate a lack of evidence-based strategies to address or mitigate the unequal social gains associated with this initiation practice, particularly in high school contexts. To address these gendered dividends and facilitate the attainment of SDG 5, the study proposes a coordinated five-pillar intervention framework to foster a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. These include:

- **Design non-segregation policies:** High schools should develop and implement policies that enforce non-gendered respect for authority and institutional rules, prohibit coercive behaviour, and promote inclusive practices and meaningful interaction across diverse learner groups. Such policies should aim to reduce both formal and informal forms of segregation that perpetuate inequality and undermine equitable learning environments.
- **Consistent policy enforcement:** Schools should establish clear and ongoing mechanisms to communicate that cultural prestige does not exempt any learner from compliance with institutional rules and regulations. Codes of conduct, anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies, and equal treatment frameworks must be applied consistently and uniformly to all learners, irrespective of initiation status.
- **Provide cultural competency training for teachers:** Teachers, particularly female and non-Xhosa educators, require structured support to effectively navigate cultural tensions within the school environment. This includes developing the capacity to distinguish between culturally recognised practices and behaviours that may cause harm or have exclusionary effects on other learners within the school's legal and institutional framework.
- **Enhance community collaboration:** Schools should actively and continuously engage parents, initiation practitioners, and community leaders in collaborative dialogue to develop approaches that uphold safety and protect the rights of all learners, irrespective of gender or initiation status.
- **Bolster safety and support mechanisms in schools:** Reporting systems for incidents of coercion, intimidation, or bullying must be strengthened and made easily accessible to all learners. Those who experience harm, particularly harm

linked to initiation-related power dynamics, should be provided with reliable counselling and appropriate psychosocial support services.

These coordinated intervention recommendations, organised into five pillars, are intended to assist schools in fulfilling their obligation to create discrimination-free, culturally responsive, and genuinely inclusive learning environments.

6 CONCLUSION

The Xhosa male initiation ritual produces discernible gender stratifications within schooling environments, which may intimidate teacher authority, impede equity-oriented pedagogy, and compromise the autonomy and safety of learners, particularly girls, as well as non-initiated and non-conformist boys, if left unaddressed. Sustainable transformation of this initiation rite requires deliberate engagement with the patriarchal dividends that reinforce inequalities among high school learners and, more broadly, among youth within communities. Without confronting these entrenched privileges, policy interventions are likely to remain reactive, responding to challenges only after they emerge, rather than proactively reshaping the socio-cultural dynamics that sustain them. Achieving meaningful transformation depends on collective, community-centred strategies that prioritise gender-inclusive approaches and foster structural change from within the cultural system itself. Therefore, it is imperative for schools and communities to design, implement, and evaluate programmes that intentionally challenge the patriarchal meanings and expectations that perpetuate inequitable and, in some instances, harmful behaviours (South African National Department of Health, 2014; WHO, 2008, 2020).

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