

MODULE 6:

Boys and masculinities in education

By Ján Michalko

Key messages

- Norms of masculinity – expectations of what it means to be a man or a boy – have a profound impact on boys' access to education, their learning and their experiences of schooling.
- Five main norms – to be dominant, providers, stoic, strong and sexually active – often have negative impacts on education, particularly for adolescents. They can also drive violence in schools and mental health issues, and depending on the specific country context, other circumstances such as poverty or conflict.
- Addressing inequitable and harmful norms, particularly around boyhood, can contribute to boys' well-being, education and employment, and help to create safer schools for women, girls and entire communities.
- Strategies to foster equitable masculinities are rooted in student-centred pedagogy that engages boys in interesting and relevant ways, and that offers them critical and empathetic spaces for reflection. They also rely on parental outreach and awareness, and training of educators to challenge their own bias.

Introduction

Access

Biased norms

Outcomes

Pathways

Transformative

Masculinities

Early childhood

LGBTQI+

About this module

This module explains how a specific set of masculinity norms affects boys' access to education, as well as their education outcomes and experiences, with a focus on formal primary and secondary schools. It also shows how these norms shape the educational experiences of girls and gender-diverse children and young people, and discusses how gender-transformative approaches that nurture more gender-equitable masculinities can benefit all children.

The importance of schools in shaping norms among young generations is one reason why schools are often political battlegrounds.

Why masculinity norms matter for education

Schools are ecosystems where norms of masculinity – expectations of what it means to be a boy and a man – are taught, socialised and contested. This happens through the curriculum, but also through everyday school practices, as well as interactions with teachers, parents and peers. Teachers may, for example, tolerate disruptive behaviour because they believe that 'boys will be boys', or encourage boys to take up certain sports ([Welmond and Gregory, 2021](#)).

Schools reflect broader inequalities in the wider society around them. While many reinforce and sustain social hierarchies and systems of power and privilege, they also have transformative potential as sites where norms of masculinity can be contested. They are entry points for programmes and initiatives that aim to shift inequitable norms, including those that drive men's violence and other forms of injustice ([Fotheringham and Wells, 2019](#)). The manosphere and pornography in particular have contributed to the spread of misogynistic views among young men in recent years ([Ipsos, 2026](#)). As a result, policy-makers in countries like the UK now look to schools as institutions that can help to counter such popular cultural influences ([UK Government, 2025](#)).

The importance of schools in shaping norms among young generations is one reason why schools are often political battlegrounds, as seen in the growing opposition to comprehensive sexuality education, bans on certain books and attacks on teachers who deliver a gender-transformative curriculum ([D'Angelo et al., 2024](#)). Masculinities and boys'



Schools have transformative potential as sites where norms of masculinity can be contested.

education are core dimensions of these conflicts. Meanwhile, many parents, civil society and policy-makers are concerned that boys are being left behind because their education participation rates and their learning outcomes in some subjects are now lower than for girls in many countries, as summarised in Box 6.1.

Box 6.1: Selected gender gaps in education

Gender gaps in education are not uniform. They vary across countries, levels of education or subjects, with girls outperforming boys in some areas. There are now more than 140 million boys out of school compared to 133 million girls, with most of these missing upper secondary education (Encinas-Martín and Cherian, 2023; UNESCO, 2026; Module 1). This is particularly true for Eastern and Southeast Asia, Europe, North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO, 2025). However, girls are still less likely to complete primary and lower secondary school than boys in low-income countries, as well as conflict-affected regions (Bonfert and Wadhwa, 2024). While 13% of boys do not attend primary school in conflict settings, this rises to 20% for girls (INEE, 2023).

In specific subjects, according to Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) statistics, only 72 boys per 100 girls achieve minimum reading proficiency in middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2024). Boys, however, tend to perform better in science and maths because teachers (and families) may support boys in STEM (science, technology engineering and maths) subjects, based on the assumption that boys and men are inherently more technically oriented (UNESCO, 2017; Brussino and McBrien, 2022). Boys also tend to have more role models in relevant fields, contributing to more confidence and interest in STEM subjects. Gendered subject choices in upper secondary contribute to the under-representation of girls and young women in some STEM fields (see Module 3).

For some actors, a perceived ‘feminisation’ of schools is the main reason for these trends. Others point to other factors, including the structure and organisation of schooling and the norms within and outside education that influence boys’ experience of schooling and aspirations.

Key norms of masculinity that affect education

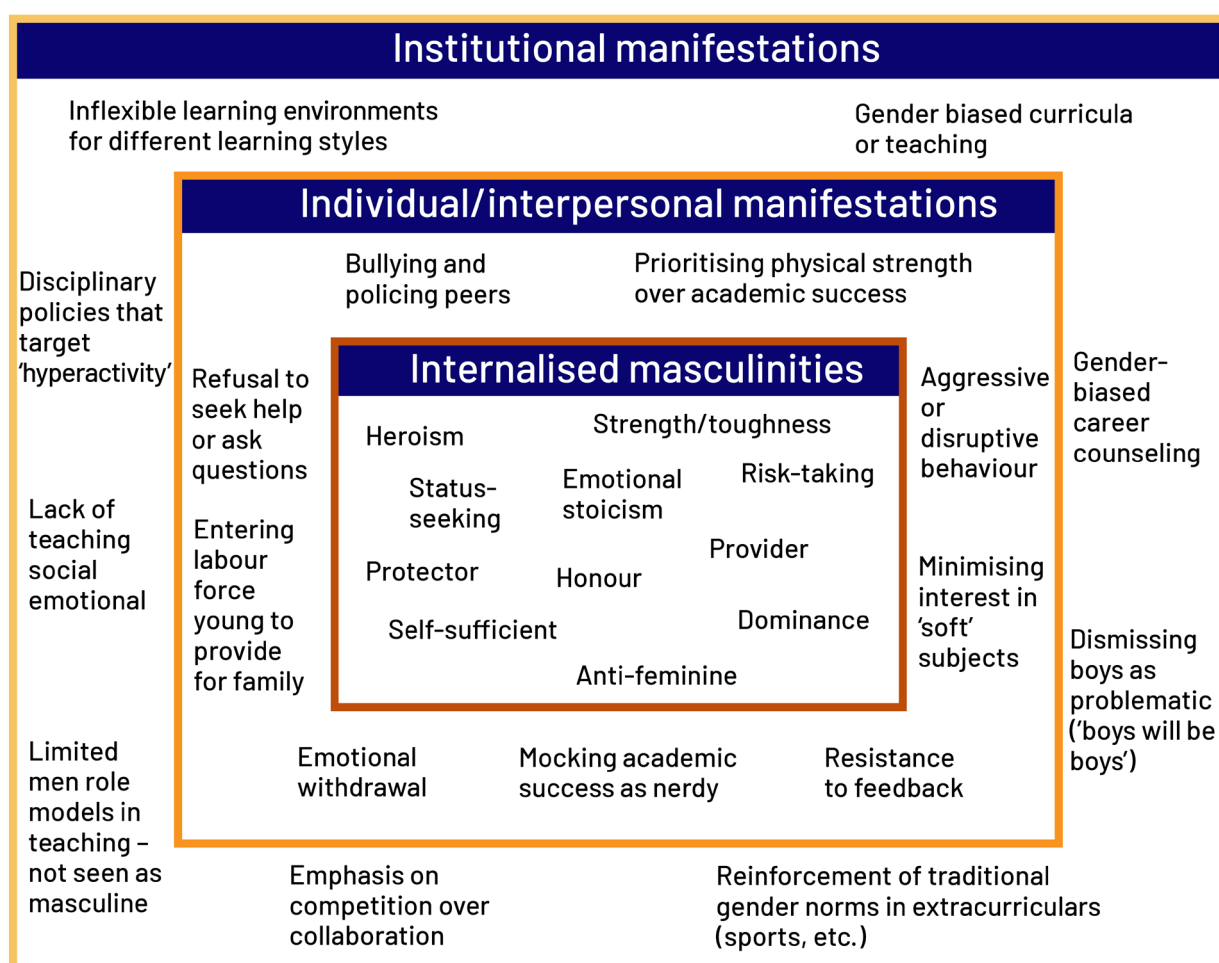
Norms of masculinity change over time and vary across countries and communities. This module, therefore, refers to masculinities rather than a homogenous or single masculinity. In many societies, the key norms of masculinity are often framed in binary contrast to femininities. In addition, patriarchal forms of masculinities also tend to be anti-feminine and dominating of women, other men, gender-diverse people, and the environment as a way to assert power and reinforce hierarchies (Lucy, 2024). During adolescence, in particular, peers play an important role in socialising others into these norms and in enforcing them (Amin et al., 2018).

Idealised or venerated versions of masculinity (also known as hegemonic masculinity) are sometimes described as a ‘man box’ into which boys and men must fit, and that places limits on them (Burrell et al., 2019). Norms of masculinity also interact with economic and political factors such as poverty, conflict, or the quality of the education system. These

shape both how norms of masculinity are influenced by education and how norms influence schooling. For example, boys – particularly those from lower socioeconomic classes – may be encouraged to pursue subjects for vocational or technical jobs, which can be seen as more masculine. Boys are also more likely to provide income that is needed for their families (UNESCO, 2026).

The five norms of masculinity outlined in Figure 6.1 tend to be present across many countries, but are further nuanced by context specificities, and by inequalities such as those based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and ability (Morrell, 2024). Other norms in Figure 6.1 that are not discussed in detail in this module are also embedded in the education system. Examples include norms of leadership, which are associated with men and masculinities. The incorporation of these expectations into the education system contributes, for example, to the under-representation of women in school leadership and management (UNESCO, 2024).

Figure 6.1: Norms of masculinity and their manifestations in education



Source: Adapted from [Ragonese \(2025\)](#).

Dominance, control and entitlement

Whether they are at home, in the playground or in the classroom, boys are often socialised to expect to monopolise the attention of family, teachers and peers, to claim physical space for themselves, to demand access to resources, or – as they get older – to have the final say. A 'naturalised' sense of entitlement can lead some boys to expect to dominate, or even control others, which can contribute to various forms of violence (Lucy, 2024; Ringrose and Regehr, 2025). Elite private schools, in particular, have been found to promote racist, classist

masculinities, which embody both male and other forms of entitlement and privilege. These are perpetuated through social networks of alumni and ‘old boys’ clubs’ (Meiklejohn et al., 2023) even after leaving school, as shown in studies from Australia and the US (Howard and Keddie, 2023; Variyan et al., 2025).

Being a breadwinner (having economic autonomy and responsibility)

Most boys and men are expected to support themselves economically and provide for their families. Even in contexts where it is increasingly accepted that men in heterosexual relationships might not have a family, single men are still expected to be independent financially. These expectations can, on the one hand, encourage parents to invest in the education of their male children. On the other hand, it can lead boys to give up education to take on income-generating activities, as it is the poorest boys who tend to leave secondary school early (UNESCO, 2026). This situation is exacerbated by the declining value of education in some countries and communities, making it seem a less desirable investment for future economic opportunities.

Stoicism and rejection of vulnerabilities

Boys are often not expected to express their emotions. Being stoic and not relying on others is seen as a sign of strength. This ‘ideal’ stands in stark contrast to the evidence of the benefits of social connection and emotional intelligence. In fact, stoicism that combines with a lack of relationships and other factors can lead to many harmful behaviours. It has negative impacts on the health and well-being of men and boys, who may not seek medical assistance or social and psychological help, and this contributes to their higher risk of death by suicide (Fisher et al., 2025; Gupta et al., 2025). A study in England, for example, shows that boys are seen to be more likely to hide their emotional struggles behind ‘acting out’ in school (Stentiford et al., 2025). It is not surprising, therefore, that boys may not be able to learn when in school and that they may be punished by their educators if they do not follow school rules.

Case study: Dropping out of school in Cambodia



A study of boys’ disengagement in Cambodia highlights that boys from disadvantaged households are some of the most at risk of dropping out of education. Data from 2018/19 shows that boys drop out of secondary school at 3% higher rates than girls, and their completion rates have declined to 40% since the early 2010s, while girls’ rose to 50%.

The root causes cut across personal, community and systems-level factors. They include a lack of motivation and insufficient family and school support. Gender norms of breadwinning in particular play a role. They help explain why the risk of dropping out is especially high for boys aged 15-17 as they get pulled out for economic activities.

While various policy and programmatic responses were put in place in Cambodia, ‘weak gender sensitivity for boys’ remains (UNESCO et al., 2026: 66). There are also concerns over sustainability of non-governmental organisation interventions, which show promise but lack institutionalisation at scale.

Source: UNESCO et al. (2026).



Case study: Role of race and class – insights from South Africa

Rooted in the history of colonisation and the white-supremacist regime of apartheid, class and race play a key role in the construction of masculinities that boys and young men navigate in South Africa.

In a study from the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), being a provider was a key element of heterosexual masculinities for both primary school-aged Black and Indian boys. However, this expectation was mediated by the different class and race expectations. Many Black boys in the study perceived themselves as disadvantaged by lack of wealth, compared to their Indian peers, while physical violence and fighting were stereotyped as a trait of Black boys.

The centrality of violence in Black masculinity, however, is challenged by many young men and boys in KZN. Some boys in peri-urban areas resist the pressure from role models and peers to engage in violence. Instead, they consciously focus on alternatives, like fitness or fashion. They construct other non-dominant masculinities rooted in religion and education, which provide future aspirations.

Source: [Ratele \(2015\)](#); [Govender and Bhana \(2023\)](#); [Ngidi et al. \(2026\)](#).

Physical strength, toughness and athleticism

Boys are also expected to be physically strong, which often means that teachers encourage them to take up sports or specific manual chores in the school yard. This can be elevated into a state-sponsored drive to make boys more ‘manly’ through physical education classes ([Roberts, 2021](#)). It can, however, also lead to boys demonstrating their strength by perpetuating violence against others, and to teachers using violence to discipline them.

(Hetero)sexual prowess and virility

Lastly, masculine norms set the expectations that boys be sexually active and dominant or even possessive. A norm of heterosexual virility can also lead to a wide array of outcomes, from violence against LGBTQ+ boys, to the spreading of sexually transmitted infections and diseases and to early marriage and parenthood. These outcomes, combined with breadwinner responsibilities, can lead to boys leaving school early ([Mehta et al. in Ruxton, 2004](#)).



Why it is important to address norms of masculinity in education

When boys are unable to meet gendered expectations and markers of success and adulthood, this can have many negative consequences. They can stop participating in mainstream politics and turn to alternative, informal and even violent spaces, or withdraw from formal education and schooling ([Honwana, 2012](#)). There are many reasons, therefore, why it is essential for educators and policy-makers to address how masculinities impact and are impacted by education ([Eck et al., 2025](#)). This section highlights two broad reasons in particular: first, to nurture the economic and social potential of boys, and second, to create safe and equitable school environments and communities for all.

Nurturing the social and economic potential of boys

According to a 2024 study by UNESCO, the direct and indirect costs of children not obtaining the basic skills they need is more than US\$10 trillion globally ([Brunello et al., 2024](#)). In countries like Burundi or Senegal, where there are high levels of disparities at boys' expense, these costs are estimated at over 20% of national gross domestic product (GDP). Addressing norms that keep boys out of education is, therefore, both a human rights imperative, as captured in the global rights frameworks, and an economic one for many policy-makers and donors.



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Supporting boys' education to achieve long-term economic and social well-being means responding to the pressures on boys to leave school early. In conflict and war contexts, in particular, depending on the specific dynamics, boys are likely to be forced out of school or encouraged to leave to join armed groups to protect their family, community or country ([Jones et al., 2022](#); [Diwakar, 2023](#); [Unfried and Kis-Katos, 2023](#)). In some countries such as South Sudan, the pressure can mean leaving school to join armed groups; in others it can lead boys to join gangs or become 'hustlers' ([Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2024](#)). In nomadic and pastoralist groups, as seen in parts of southern Africa, boys are unable to attend school regularly as they travel with their

cattle ([UNESCO, 2022](#)). Elsewhere, as in Cambodia, boys often migrate, even across borders ([Hamilton and Jhaj, 2020](#)) to secure resources for their families and communities ([Welmond and Gregory, 2021](#)).

Creating safe and gender-equitable schools and communities

Most schools around the world in lower-, middle- and upper-income countries continue to tolerate or perpetuate masculine norms that make them unsafe, particularly for women and girls, but also for many boys and gender-diverse people ([OECD, 2022](#); [Amadori et al., 2023](#)). Violence is one of the key challenges affecting boys' ability to enjoy their right to education, as boys perpetuate violence against other boys, and are also more likely to experience corporal punishment from teachers ([UNESCO, 2024](#)).

A dominant form of violence tied to masculine norms is bullying, which contributes to negative education outcomes and has profound impacts on mental well-being ([OECD, 2026](#)). A 2023 study from 21 middle-income countries found that boys tend to be bullied more than girls ([Wong and Smarrelli, 2025](#)), while across OECD countries, boys from immigrant backgrounds experience bullying more frequently than their peers ([OECD, 2026](#)). Some studies, however, show that girls are more affected by cyber-bullying ([Kasturiratna et al., 2025](#)).

Boys can be bullied and physically abused by their peers for not being good at certain 'masculine' physical activities or sports, not least because they may have some physical disadvantage, or because of their academic performance. Some 'manfluencers' (see Box 6.2) are promoting harmful physical body alterations practices like 'looksmaxxing', based on the theory that men who meet certain beauty standards have more societal value and power. These narratives are based on men assessing and ranking each other ([Halpin et al., 2025](#)).

Box 6.2: Violence against gender non-conforming boys

Boys who do not conform to masculine norms – especially gay, bisexual and trans boys – are most likely to experience bullying (UNESCO, 2016: 11; UNESCO, 2022: 47). A 2021 study by UNESCO found that 42% of LGBT youth reported having been ‘ridiculed, teased, insulted or threatened at school because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, primarily by their peers’ (UNESCO, 2021: 3). In many countries, teachers are less likely to intervene if bullying targets LGBTQI+ students. A study in South Africa has shown, for example, how queer students are bullied by their peers and are also physically punished for transgressions by their teachers (Bhana and Mayeza, 2019).

Other forms of violence perpetrated by boys and men in schools target women and girls – from sexual harassment to the non-consensual sharing of images (Ringrose et al., 2021; Setty, 2022; Ringrose and Regehr, 2023). Women teachers are also reporting rising misogyny from boys in the classroom in Australia, Canada, Chile and the US (Wescott et al., 2024; Sandau and Cousineau, 2025; Education International, 2026). In the UK, nearly 22% of women teachers surveyed reported misogynistic language from their pupils (NASUWT, 2026). This can be motivated by expectations that boys will show sexual dominance, and has been exacerbated by the manosphere and sexism embedded in artificial intelligence (AI) and digital infrastructure.

Responding to the manosphere and online misogyny

The manosphere and social media have become spaces where many boys increasingly look for answers about careers, health, dating and friendships (Fisher et al., 2025; UN Women, 2025). For example, three-quarters of 13–17-year-old boys and girls in the US use YouTube every day and half say they are almost constantly online (Faverio and Sidoti, 2024). In South Africa, a study of more than 2,000 adolescents found that almost half the boys surveyed check their WhatsApp constantly or multiple times a day, and more than half check their Instagram at least once a day (le Roux and Feldman, 2024).

Much of the content young people encounter online is misogynistic, racist and queerphobic (Regehr et al., 2024). It often promotes visions of economic success that undermine the value of education and training for boys, as they idolise getting rich quickly, including through various crypto-currency schemes. In the early 2020s, many boys and young men turned to misogynist personalities like Andrew Tate (Hayes et al., 2026). They sought his views on becoming successful and rich, while many still reject his misogyny (Flood and Keddle, 2026; Milne and Baker, 2026). More recently, influencers like Amadeo Lladós (Spain), Thiago Schutz in Brazil or Elvish Yadav in India, have become popular among adolescent boys (Vilaça, 2023; Bagchi, 2024; Gerrand et al., 2025). An ALIGN study on social media use among adolescent boys in Mexico found that the idealised man promoted by such manfluencers is not only strong but is in control of relationships and can hit a woman if she ‘misbehaves’ (Cala et al., 2024).

This said, many boys still adopt more egalitarian attitudes and behave inclusively despite the many misogynistic harms they experience online and offline (Anderson and McCormack, 2018).



In the early 2020s many boys and young men turned to misogynist personalities like Andrew Tate.

They also engage critically with harmful content online and question the type of masculinities that they are exposed to. A study of boys in the UK found only 23% of those aged 13-15 years agree with Tate's view of women ([Smith, 2023](#)). Studies from Australia and the UK also show that more nuance is needed in understanding young men's online behaviours and their ambivalent responses to the various content they consume ([Flood and Keddle, 2026](#); [Milne and Baker, 2026](#)).

What works to respond to norms of masculinity in education

This section summarises strategies that shift or respond to norms, attitudes and beliefs tied to masculinities in schools and education. It highlights initiatives that respond to issues of access, learning, and the overall experience of being in a school setting. Many of these interventions have a positive impact for both boys and girls and improve the situation for all. However, academic studies on this topic are predominantly from the global North, highlighting a key gap for future research, while others capture shifts in attitudes but not shifts in norms or practices.

Interventions working with boys and norms of masculinity have three common elements: curriculum and teaching material reforms; training and skills development for educators including teachers and school leaders; and broader community and social interventions ([Marcus et al., 2024](#)). A shared thread across these strategies is the positive benefit of a 'whole school' approach. This aims to align the curriculum (for example, comprehensive sexuality and relationships education), pedagogies, the broader school environment and school leadership, as well as the involvement of parents, caregivers and the community, with all elements positively reinforcing each other. Without such alignment and coordination, many initiatives can fall short of achieving sustainable change (see [Module 5](#) for more detail).



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There is limited evidence of large-scale, education systems-wide initiatives that target masculinities specifically, or that focus only on boys to shift their attitudes, beliefs and practices. Most of the existing evaluations-based evidence comes from smaller-scale initiatives and programmes ([Marcus et al., 2024](#)). However, one notable example of an existing systems-level intervention is the Taaron ki Toli curriculum designed by Breakthrough in India, where a gender-transformative curriculum has been scaled up into the state-wide curriculum on the basis of programmatic pilots ([Scaling Community of Practice and Breakthrough India, 2023](#)).

Many programmes that address masculine norms emerge from efforts to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) through, for example, teaching consent, or through education on sexual health. Effective programmes offer reflective spaces where boys can, safely and with empathy, explore their experiences of gender inequalities in their own lives and the lives of the women and girls around them ([Keddie, 2022](#)). Such reflective exercises take time, which is often scarce in formal education where teachers face time pressures to deliver a specific curriculum and, in many contexts, are also incentivised to teach to national exam requirements.

It also requires a facilitation skillset that is not always integrated into teacher training and common pedagogical approaches and that requires additional upskilling. This means that many programmes – for example, by Beyond Equality in the UK ([Beyond Equality, n.d.](#)) or Room to Read in Cambodia ([Room to Read, n.d.](#)) – rely on external facilitators who are brought into schools to engage with the boys. This can be costly and unsystematic and it relies on the interest of individual teachers and school leaders. Initiatives that train teachers directly often use trainer of trainers (or cascade models) or communities of practice, which allow wider reach but can face lower quality.



Teachers use boys' lived realities, concerns and values as a starting point, seeing these as assets or building blocks rather than deficiencies.

Many evaluations highlight the need for student-centred pedagogy, not least as a way to minimise boys' potential resistance to gender equality ([O'Rourke et al., 2024](#)). For example, the Connect with Respect programme works with teachers in Southeast Asia ([UNESCO, 2018](#)) and southern Africa ([UNESCO, 2021](#)) to help them implement curriculum content that is gender-related, including content on misogyny.

In these approaches, teachers use boys' lived realities, concerns and values as a starting point, seeing these as assets or building blocks rather than deficiencies. For example, pedagogies of this kind can build on existing norms around hard work, leadership or brotherhood. They also use methods that are interesting for boys and topics that reflect their lives. For example, an evaluation of a consent intervention in Australia found that without this approach, which focuses on the needs and experiences of boys, they can perceive gender equality programmes as a chore and a burden ([Hayes et al., 2022](#)).

Similarly, experiences of organisations such as Study Hall Foundation in India demonstrate that using examples and scenarios from students' everyday realities and interests, with the help of participatory methods, makes them more likely to engage in such reflections ([Sahni, 2019](#)). In this regard, gamification represents a promising method for working with boys in particular ([Pascoe et al., 2023](#)), as does the use of podcasts ([McInerney and Burrell, 2023](#)), art ([Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, 2025](#)) and social media formats.

These interventions have, primarily, led to changes in stated beliefs or attitudes. The Connect with Respect programme, for example, has seen a decrease in boys' and girls' views that physical violence is acceptable at home and an increase in their belief that domestic chores should be shared. There have also been some successes in self-reported changes

in practices, particularly with household chores – for example, with the Discover learning programme in Tanzania ([Save the Children and the Institute of Human Development, 2021](#)).

Strategies that respond to norms affecting access to education

Access to education in early adolescence is shaped by parents and caregivers, who often exercise power and control over boys' education. Programmes can engage parents (together with community and peers) to help explain the benefits of boys' education. This approach can be strengthened by providing practical life skills and training that assuages concerns among boys and their parents about their future economic potential, as seen in the Room to Read programme in Cambodia ([Jeong et al., 2023](#)).

Other interventions address systemic barriers that interact with gender norms to exacerbate their negative impact, such as poverty and conflict. For example, the provision of free meals or cash transfers can help economically disadvantaged households, in particular, to send their children to school. While much of the evidence to date demonstrates a higher impact on girls' enrolment, a few case studies show positive improvements for both boys and girls, while many studies also demonstrate some positive impacts on learning outcomes ([Acosta and Bedasso, 2024](#)). Further studies are needed that consider the impact on boys and the role of masculine norms more explicitly.



Given the diversity of boys' lived experiences, it is crucial that their role models are relatable, including men from their own communities who have had similar experiences.

Some interventions focus on role models and information about various pathways for employment and income generation, aiming to increase awareness of the career options that are available for boys. Given the diversity of boys' lived experiences, it is crucial that their role models are relatable, including men from their own communities who have had similar experiences ([Morse, 2025](#)). However, many approaches based on role models lack clear evidence of impact in increasing boys' school attendance, particularly in a context of competing narratives from manfluencers, peers and others.

Interventions can also try to identify implicit norms-based biases in the education system that can limit access. For example, a study from four Southeast Asian countries found that when secondary schools face funding shortages and capacity restrictions, they prioritise admissions of students who perform better in primary school ([UNGEI, 2012](#)). They do so based on metrics such as grades. As girls tend to outperform boys, this creates a hidden barrier to boys' transition into secondary education.

Strategies that respond to norms affecting learning

Teachers, educators and other school staff are key for successful interventions ([UNESCO, 2021](#)). Programmes and policies can support them to challenge the gender stereotypes and biases that they may have internalised and that shape their engagement with their pupils, including boys ([Marcus et al., 2024](#)).

Teachers can be supported to develop and practice gender-responsive pedagogy – meaning student-centred teaching practices that consider gender issues (Cabus et al., 2021). This can occur through multiple avenues such as pre-service and in-service training. Offered by various actors, from ministries of education to civil society programmes, this training can help to upskill educators and support them as they go through critical reflections about their own understanding of gender and stereotypes. This can help to challenge stereotypes, including expectations that boys are better at STEM subjects, and naturally more athletic or disruptive.

In the absence of state funding to offer such systemic support, educators can – and do – form self-help communities and networks to continue to advance their skills and share good practices with one another, as demonstrated in an ALIGN study in Colombia (Serrano et al., 2024). In such circumstances, the state and school leaders can create an enabling environment where teachers can take part in these groups by giving them the time and space to do so.

Strategies that respond to norms affecting experiences in school

Boy-on-boy violence has been addressed through programmes that aim to change the acceptability or tolerance of violence as a way of showing one's masculinity and belonging to a harmful peer culture. Bystander interventions, in particular, seek to encourage boys who witness such violence to identify safe ways to engage with their friends and peers to challenge such behaviours (Flood and Ertel, 2020; Ringrose et al., 2023). The ambition is to make violence everyone's business, especially the business of those boys who may see themselves as 'the good guys' and who do not perpetrate such violence (Katz, 2025).



Barriers to boys' engagement in gender equality work include the fear of being seen as the outsider of a peer group or being ostracised by peers for speaking out against prevalent norms.

Barriers to boys' engagement in gender equality work include the fear of being seen as the outsider of a peer group or being ostracised by peers for speaking out against prevalent norms (Stoudt, 2006). This fear of being seen as 'the only one' wanting to speak out is what makes role models so important. It is also why awareness raising, demystifying and open conversations are crucial, as men tend to overestimate the acceptance and prevalence of some norms – for example, misogynistic language and GBV (Katz, 2025).

In addition to individual and community-based interventions, some initiatives and researchers focus on systemic enablers of violence, such as social media business operating models. They demand that tech companies take greater responsibility for addressing digital hate and cyberviolence or establishing the principles of safety and equality by design (Janickyj et al., 2025).

Many countries are now experimenting with measures to tackle negative social media impacts, including school phone bans (UNESCO, 2024). As of 2026, nearly 60% of all countries have such policies in place (UNESCO, 2026). Others, such as Australia, have launched age-based restrictions of some social media platforms (Campbell et al., 2024). Evidence on how far these measures either curb the negative, gendered impacts or promote

positive educational outcomes is still in its early stages. However, many scholars propose alternatives that are rooted in recognising the rights, agency and experiences of children and young people ([EU Kids Online, 2025](#); [Stahl et al., 2026](#)). These focus more on education to support responsible digital citizenship ([Harrison and Polizzi, 2023](#)) and critical digital literacy or media skills. However, these digital interventions must also be accompanied by measures in the 'offline' world, as these spheres of life are closely intertwined and reinforce each other.

Useful resources

Understanding the impact of gender norms on boys' education

[Jere et al. \(2026\)](#) - *Lifting barriers: Boys' disengagement from education* is a scoping study that identifies programmes that keep boys in school, especially activities that address inequitable norms.

[Ragonese \(2025\)](#) - *Don't forget about the boys: Educational equity in LMIC contexts* is a short blog that summarises insights from the *Lifting Barriers project*. It is led by a consortium including UNESCO, Equimundo and the University of East Anglia, and outlines reasons for boys' disengagement from education, including harmful norms.

[UNESCO \(2022\)](#) - *Leave no child behind: lobar report on boys' disengagement from education* is a literature-based study that demonsgrates the benefits of boys' education for all. The study points out how addressing causes of disengagement, including norms, brings many benefits.

[Welmond and Gregory \(2021\)](#) - *Educational underachievement among boys and men* is a World Bank study providing nuanced details about the narrative that boys are not performing the same as girls. It shows in which countries, subjects and levels of education gender gaps exist.

Programmes and strategies to work with and for boys on transforming norms through education

[Brussino and McBrien \(2022\)](#) - *Gender stereotypes in education: Policies and practices to address gender stereotyping across OECD education systems* offers an overview of curriculum, capacity-building and school-level interventions to eradicate gender stereotypes.

[Burrell et al. \(2019\)](#) - *Changing gender norms: Engaging with men and boys* is a foundational report summarising evidence from UK-based programmes and experts. It highlights the impact of norms, and gives an overview of recommended action in education and other areas.

[Marcus et al. \(2024\)](#) - *Nurturing gender-equitable masculinities: Lessons for transforming norms through education systems* summarises good practices based on programme evaluations in predominantly lower- and middle-income countries. It includes insights into teacher training and support, as well as classroom practices and pedagogies.

[UNESCO \(2018\)](#) - *Connect with respect: preventing gender-based violence in schools; classroom programme for students in early secondary school (ages 11-14)* is a tool designed for the flagship project, Connect with Respect. It is intended for teachers, especially in Asia and the Pacific, to use in formal school settings.

Responding to the manosphere in the education sector

[O'Rourke et al. \(2024\)](#) - *Addressing the impact of masculinity influencers on teenage boys - a guide for schools, teachers and parents/guardians* was developed at the Anti-bullying Centre of Dublin City University and outlines who influencers are, what impact they are having and how to work with young people to change harmful culture online and offline.

[Pfitzner et al. \(2026\)](#) - *An introductory guide to the manosphere and the impacts for young people, teachers and schools* was developed for Australian schools to help educators understand the impact of the manosphere on young people and how to respond, including by developing critical digital media literacy.

[Ringrose et al. \(2023\)](#) - *Equipping young people to navigate post-digital sexual violence* describes school-based student workshops and teacher training that were developed to increase understanding and responses to technology-facilitated sexual violence.