

**Reframing masculinity:**

**A literature review on current constructions of masculinities in schools, and  
recommendations for future practice.**

By Sóla May Elínardóttir, University of Bristol

For, Coram Life Education

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## **Introduction**

The government has committed to halving levels of violence against women in girls within a decade (Home Office, 2025). Within the last ten years, there have been 898 female victims of domestic homicide, 92% of whom were killed by a man (Home Office, 2025). With the rise of misogynistic media discourse, and rapidly changing narratives surrounding masculinity, to meet this goal, it is essential for there to be increased education aiming to reframe hegemonic, harmful forms of masculinity. Therefore, this report comprises a literature review discussing the prevailing manifestations of masculinities in men and boys, as well as recommendations on how educators can attempt to encourage healthier masculinity. This report begins by exploring concepts and theories behind how unhealthy, or ‘toxic’ masculinity presents in the behaviours of young boys and men, detailing how young boys are presented with a script of acceptable behaviours pushing them to match traditional norms (Burrell et al, 2019). Educational practices that promote harmful masculinity will then be reviewed, including direct and indirect practices. Recommended progressive teaching practices will be explored, along with the importance of teaching consent. Four example activities that can be used in classrooms are recommended, meeting the recommendations within this report. They include: “‘Digital detectives: truth or trick?’- an exercise for navigating online spaces and conspiracies’; ‘Exploring gender stereotypes and masculinity through classroom discussion’; “‘Building a strong man”- an activity on positive masculinity’; and “‘The adventure of Alex and Jesse”- A story-based Gender Stereotype activity’.

To conclude, this report considers examples of organisations and their approaches including ‘It’s a man’s issue’ campaign (Rayment, 2024), and ‘Being ManKind’ (Being ManKind, 2024), to highlight current, effective practices in tackling hegemonic masculine norms in schools. This review seeks to critically examine current masculine constructions, demonstrate their negative impact on all genders, and provide examples that could offer a foundation for future educational workshops.

## **Literature review**

### *Concepts and theories behind masculinity in young boys*

The concept of masculinity for young boys and men is rooted in a universally insecure narrative, which causes rage and anxiety in the ongoing struggle to be a 'proper' boy (Rose 2016 cited in Equimundo, 2022). Hegemonic masculinity creates a hierarchy of masculinities, whereby stereotypical traits like physical prowess, heterosexuality and self-reliance are seen to be superior and the goal for young boys (Equimundo, 2022). Gender norms present children with a set of acceptable behaviours (Burrell et al, 2019), pushing boys to identify with prevailing masculine norms, viewing it as superior to femininity, thus causing marginalisation for all genders. The struggle to conform to hegemonic masculinity manifests in problematic behaviours, for example excusing violent actions as a biological inevitability and an intrinsic part of being a man (Equimundo, 2022). The differing characteristics of gender are a result of socialisation. Therefore, schools are a crucial site in the formation of boys' gender schema, as they often perpetuate these dynamics. For example, sport is an avenue to assert masculinity, whereby athletic ability and playground dominance is used to maintain hierarchies (Renold, 2004). The encouragement of physical contact sports reinforces aggression and competitiveness, whilst marginalising unathletic boys, stripping them of their own masculine identity (Equimundo 2022, Renold, 2004). In schools, peer relationships further solidify these norms, as spaces hold potential for empathy and intimacy, however social pressure and 'banter' causes young boys to avoid seeming too close to their male friends. They attempt to conform to norms presented to them, but this can be at the expense of their mental health (Equimundo, 2022). This creates spaces in which children police each other (Burrell et al, 2019), penalising boys for not being involved in sports, gaming, or other male dominated spaces, through bullying and homophobia (Equimundo, 2022). This marginalisation also adversely affects girls, as female athletes are seen to be less 'womanly' (Equimundo, 2022).

Traditional masculine norms have negatively affected gender equity in education, particularly for working class boys. There is a view that schools are highly feminised environments, which often fuels the rhetoric that schools unfairly cater to girls and students of colour, portraying boys as victims of 'reverse discrimination' (Equimundo, 2022). Working class boys generally suffer in gender socialisation, as they are unable to

achieve the traditional masculine norms of being financially independent, therefore when activities like reading are seen as feminine, they resist engaging in schoolwork as a means of affirming their place in society (Equimundo, 2022). Additionally, both children and adults often believe boys to be academically inferior to girls, which can lead to self-fulfilling consequences (Burrell et al, 2019). There is no script on how to be a working-class boy in a feminised environment, leading boys to exclude themselves academically, preferring employment that is seen to be 'respectable working class' (Stahl 2016, cited in Burrell et al 2019). Thus, certain masculine norms negatively affect young boys' school achievement. This is demonstrated by the findings in the Education Policy Institute's annual report that showed, despite an overall decrease in the gender gap attainment levels, by the end of primary school in 2023, boys were 0.6 months behind girls in their learning, and by the end of secondary school, they were 4.5 months behind girls in their GCSEs (Education Policy Institute, 2024).

In the digital world, gender socialisation has become more complex, as childhood is no longer separate from the digital (Equimundo, 2022). Young people are increasingly engaged in media that reinforces gender roles. Boys are exposed to and harassed with unwanted sexual content, whilst girls experience non-consensual image sharing, perpetuating the narrative that they are objects of exchange and competition (Equimundo, 2022). Gaming spaces have also become male dominated spaces whereby girls' gaming abilities are frequently disparaged. Girls are often portrayed as being passive and decorative in the media, and boys are portrayed as having power and dominance, leading to a surplus of male superheroes and female weakness (Burrell et al, 2019). Harmful media figures like Andrew Tate cultivate 'toxic masculinity' and adverse rhetorics about women, giving boys who may feel alienated a popular figure to relate and look up to (Candy, 2024). Therefore, steps must be taken to help young people navigate a digital world that reinforces norms of masculinity.

Access to online material is growing, with Ofcom (2022) finding that 91% of children have access to a smart phone by the age of 11. Andrew Tate's media presence became a focus of concern in the summer of 2022 (Smith 2022), where his platform gained popularity, in which he promoted misogynistic narratives, for example that

women are the property of men, that women should bear responsibility for rape, and a reinforcement of regressive stereotypes including that women shouldn't drive (Das, 2022). This misogyny is very accessible to boys (Will, 2023); thus the digital world plays a significant role in facilitating new strains of hatred and violence against women (Haslop et al, 2024).

The 'manosphere' is a term to describe the broad space of misogynistic ideas and antifeminist discourses (Jaki et al 2019 cited in Han and Yin 2022). Figures like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson have become 'gurus' of the 'manosphere', a position they have secured by displaying their misogynistic beliefs as fact, and by offering 'solutions' for men's feelings of disenfranchisement (Bujalka et al, 2022). The concern is that these online platforms will resonate with a generation of 'lost boys' (Bragg et al, 2022), as rising anti-feminist discourse promotes male victimhood, for example that men's lives are harder than women's, including that men must be rich to be attractive to women (Thurston 2022 cited in Haslop et al 2024). This plays on fears related to heterosexual masculinity for boys and young men (Ringrose et al, 2021). Kimmel and Davis (2011) state that young boys are developing in an age where there is no script that informs them of how to become a man, meaning they are likely to fall into these misogynistic patterns of thinking that is readily available to them.

Haslop et al (2024), reports evidence surrounding how boys gain homosocial currency through the sharing of un-consensual pornographic images of girls, which acts as 'proof' of their heterosexuality, giving them access to hegemonic masculinity through misogyny (Haslop and O'Rourke, 2021). Haslop et al (2024) found that half of the boys in their focus groups were supportive of Andrew Tate's views, and even if they did not entirely agree, still saw him as a voice of reason in debates about gender fairness. Another growing online space is 'TikTok', often seen as an inclusive egalitarian platform (Foster and Baker, 2022). However, if men engage in typically feminine behaviours like dancing or nail painting, these actions are paired with lyrics and physical gestures that sexualise women and re-assert their strength as heterosexual recuperation (McCormack and Anderson 2010 cited in Foster and Baker, 2022). 'Heterosexual recuperation' refers to the ways in which individuals, often heterosexual men, assert their heterosexual

identity, particularly in the face of challenges or exposure to alternative sexualities. It involves two strategies used to maintain heterosexual norms and boundaries. Either “ironic” heterosexual recuperation whereby boys satirically claim homosexual desire through jokes, verbal and physical displays of homosexuality to “enable emotional bonding between friends” (McCormack, 2012, p.93), or “conquestial” heterosexual recuperation which involves overt boasting of heterosexual desire and conquests to reinforce their heterosexual identity (McCormack, 2012). In addition, there are unequal rewards for Tik Tok creators, as white, cisgender, heterosexual and conventionally attractive men are the most followed (Foster and Baker, 2022). These dominant forms of masculinity carry risks for poor mental health for boys and men, and these sex differences in mental health emerge across late childhood and adolescence (Rice et al 2021), making early education crucial in shaping the social development of young boys (Rice et al 2021). Furthermore, there is a growing need for education that equips children to safely navigate online spaces.

A growing body of research debates the importance of positive male role models for young boys and their perception of masculinity. Whilst some argue that there is merely a need for positive, empathetic role models regardless of gender (Rixton et al 2018 cited in Equimundo 2022), research shows that boys need male role models that demonstrate non-toxic forms of masculinity that they can strive towards (Burrell et al, 2020). Positive male role models—fathers, mentors, teachers—help boys build identity, purpose, and emotional strength, and their absence contributes to struggles in education, work, and relationships for many young men (Reeves, 2022).

Marcus Rashford, a footballer who appeals to many young boys as a role model, speaks out about men’s mental health, his experiences coming from a working-class background (Burt, 2021), and attributes his success to his mother (Martin and Allen, 2023). As opposed to resorting to misogynistic figures like Andrew Tate.

Burrell et al (2019), urge consideration of intersectionality, emphasising the diverse range of ways boys experience masculinity. For example, Khan et al. (2017) argue that experiences of racism have significant influence on the mental health of young Black

boys and men, such as through demonising media representation designed to ‘wear down’ their resilience as they progress through adolescence. Baker and Levon (2016) note that representations of masculinity are highly racialised and classed, for example Black and Asian men are characterised as being violent and morally and socially deviant, compared to White boys who are often portrayed as being unfairly excluded from society. Richard Reeves (2022) adds that whilst Asian boys tend to have higher educational outcomes than Black boys, they also struggle with cultural expectations and educational pressure.

Men with disabilities are unable to meet dominant masculinity norms as they may not have physical prowess, and do not have power over women if they receive consistent care from them (Burrell et al, 2019). This highlights the importance of challenging narrow masculinity norms so that men and boys can navigate their identities without the burden of exclusion, and women and girls aren’t subjected to the hegemonic masculine need to assert dominance.

### *Educational practices promoting harmful masculinity*

Society reinforces gender binaries without targeting root causes of gender-based violence and harmful masculinity itself (Widanaralalage et al 2022 cited in Equimundo 2022). School as an institution is consistently regulating and reinforcing gender identities, e.g. male and female school uniforms (Equimundo, 2022). This contributes to the concept of masculinity being a rigid construction, often to the detriment of both boys and girls. Boys are encouraged to assert dominance, while girls’ emotional and educational needs are neglected in favour of boys. This has been seen in boys ‘boysplaning’ from a young age, interrupting and shaming girls, and physically controlling classroom spaces (Equimundo, 2022). This can also be seen in playground spaces, whereby the space is controlled by boys, and boys have been found to mock the ‘girls’ play’ to subordinate them (Pawlowski et al., 2014). This perpetuates male dominance, which undermines gender equity, and reinforces the need for a whole school approach as hegemonic masculine norms causes widespread harm for both

boys and girls. Atkinson and DePalmer (2008) cites an example of a teacher jokingly accusing boys of flirting to humiliate them and manage their behaviour, reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Existing literature cautions educators on how to approach harmful versions of masculinity in young boys and men. Current constructions adversely affect boys as well as girls, notably in mental health problems, with the rate of male suicide globally 2-4x that of females. Males fare poorly on indices of substance misuse, risk-taking related injury, aggression and incarceration (Rice et al 2021). Boys are more likely to achieve lower reading and writing skills, and more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability or behavioral issues at school (Reeves, 2022). An article in the Independent (Candy, 2024), argues that boys are now growing up in an environment where they are immediately considered guilty or potentially guilty of gender-based violence or discrimination, leaving boys feeling powerless in the face of feminism. Whilst boys should not be personally attacked when learning about forms of masculinity, boys should be made aware of their structural privilege, and to recognise and be held responsible for their behaviour. Examples of how educators can effectively tackle this can be found in the 'It's a man's issue campaign', discussed in the example organisations section below.

Whilst 'toxic masculinity' exists, it is sometimes used to describe all expressions of masculinity, rather than being limited to specific harmful behaviours. 'If we tell a generation of boys that masculinity itself is toxic, we shouldn't be surprised if they stop trying to be good men.' (Reeves, 2022).

### *Recommendations for reframing and presenting masculinity*

"We have told a generation of boys what not to be, without telling them what to be". (Reeves, 2022).

Overall, the range of literature analysed highlights the importance of challenging toxic forms of masculinity from a young age (Candy, 2024), to understand how it limits all

children, not just gender conforming children (Equimundo, 2022). An intersectional perspective is important, representing the voices and experiences of a diverse range of boys to avoid marginalisation and to expand the range of healthy masculinities (Equimundo, 2022). Research highlights that boys must conform to harmful behavioural norms, are treated as perpetrators from a young age, and lack examples of healthy masculinity to look up to (Burrell et al, 2019). Equimundo (2022) highlights the importance of not depicting all boys as future perpetrators, but with sensitivity to the intricacy of learning masculinity. Although men have more structural power, this can be relative, which needs recognition whilst simultaneously recognising the structural disadvantage women and girls face (Burrell et al, 2020).

Interventions should be restorative rather than punitive, giving children awareness of power and violence and engaging them in solutions. Lombard (2016) suggests creating space to name violent acts as violent so they can be validated and labelled as wrong by children from a young age. Gender roles should also be challenged in books and toys (Lyttleton-Smith 2019; Spinner et al., 2018 cited in Equimundo 2022). Educators need to include modern and historical examples to encourage complex understandings of masculinity (Educating for equality, 2024). In schools, teachers could encourage a structured debate on representations of gender in popular media (Educating for equality, 2024), including how male characters are more likely to be seen as strong and intelligent, and female characters weak and decorative. Educating for equality (2024) suggests role playing to allow pupils to navigate scenarios involving gender biases themselves. As these gender norms are so deeply engrained, it is important to create a safe learning space, whereby pupils can participate on their own terms, and are not shamed for entrenched beliefs like victim blaming, instead being made aware and reflecting on these widely circulated beliefs (Equimundo, 2022). Educators should create an environment based on conversation and collaboration, as opposed to passive learning, to support critical thinking and discussion (Equimundo, 2022, Burrell et al 2019).

Real institutional change comes from long term work across multiple spheres including peer, individual, and community levels (Burrell et al, 2019). This requires a holistic

approach that addresses how gender norms are reproduced at different levels, for example by including people across the whole school in their discussions (Burrell et al, 2020). Schools should also encourage engagement from families, to ensure consistency across institutions (Burrell et al, 2019).

The Bystander effect is a particularly important issue that needs addressing, as ‘banter’ between boys can often include harmful, misogynistic narratives, that many boys can recognise as wrong, but feel unable to challenge it. The Bystander effect is whereby one ignores danger or not lending a hand to another person or a friend due to a range of psychological and social factors that prevent us from responding safely (Goulden, 2018). Latane and Darley (1968), identify five steps to helping someone in need: spot something is happening; recognise that someone needs help; take responsibility for providing help; decide how to help; and provide help. Examples of challenging the bystander effect through teacher are already prevalent in SCARF teachings, for example see the Year 4 activity: ‘Safety in numbers’, and the Year 6 activity: ‘Behave yourself’.

To change the narrative around gender norms there must be more positive portrayals of positive masculinity, such as through restructuring ideas of being a father, demonstrating how caring masculine identities can emerge, promoting diverse care practices (Equimundo, 2022). This is especially important for working class boys, as society’s definition of being a father entails being able to provide financially, meaning working class boys can struggle to identify with this role (Equimundo, 2022). However, this needs to be done in a way whereby things are not taken away, it is fine to be ‘strong’, but in different, broader ways (Burrell et al, 2019). The goal isn’t to make boys less masculine, but to help them channel masculine energy in healthy, constructive ways. In turn, recognising that masculinity is not pathological per se but can help challenge the power of prominent influencers and narratives (Reeves. 2022).

When approaching this task, it is vital to collaborate and be accountable to women and girls’ organisations to ensure gender inequalities are not being replicated in the work itself (Burrell et al, 2020). Girls and women’s voices should be heard, and boys and men

actively engaged whilst being encouraged to take responsibility for their own behaviour (Burrell et al, 2020). Educators must be prepared for defensive responses and offensive comments, but they must be ready with answers that do not blame individual men and provide examples of positive change to prevent dis-heartedness (Burrell et al, 2020).

Wilson et al (2021) provides a potential framework to redefine masculinity that can be used in schools. It emphasises the reconstruction of the stereotypical 'masculine' trait of strength into three broad human strengths including: being able to connect to yourself and others; being motivated to engage with and contribute effectively to society beyond social pressure; and to be committed to one's values and have the capacity to be flexible around 'emotional restriction' and seek help. This framework offers an example of how schools can attempt to shift expectations of boys and men in today's social climate (Wilson et al, 2021). Matt Pinkett's 'Boys don't try?' book shows that there is need for reform in both the curriculum and in teaching practices (Pinkett and Roberts, 2019). It is crucial to diversify reading lists to include texts with strong female leads, and where not all monsters are male. The Empathy Lab has a 'Read for Empathy' collection, which is a book list chosen by professionals, with a diverse range of characters and storylines to give adults the means to 'raise an empathy-educated generation' (Empathy Lab, 2025). Reading is a useful tool to shift away from toxic forms of masculinity and negative stereotypes. Additionally, the 'Read for Empathy' collection recommends books including 'You could be so pretty' by Holly Bourne and 'Hazel Hill Is Gonna Win This One' by Maggie Horne, which are books about girls' experiences that will be useful for young boys to understand and empathise with them (Empathy Lab, 2025).

Seating plans should be reviewed to ensure educators are teaching ability not gender (Pinkett and Roberts, 2019). Placing 'misbehaving' boys with 'well-behaved' girls to regulate boys' behaviour perpetuates the expectation that females take responsibility to teach and look after their male peers, at the cost of their own learning and experiences (Pinkett and Roberts, 2019).

*Considering gender dynamics when teaching consent*

Current norms and teaching methods around consent is a crucial topic in literature focusing on 'toxic masculinities' in schools. Schools are required to teach about consent as part of the Relationships, Sex and Health Education curriculum, yet sexual harassment is normalised in schools. Setty (2022), found that consent education is often focused on informing boys of legal and acceptable behaviours, and teachers have varying engagement with social and emotional dimensions of consent. The emphasis on not doing anything illegal has implications, as consent is perceived as a game, whereby once boys get the 'green light' they believe they can do whatever they wish, therefore teaching should shift to an approach that highlights morals (Setty, 2022). There is also evidence of tedious repetition of the 'cup of tea' video. Young boys often view consent as a future issue and are detached from it and therefore not engaged in the learning (Setty, 2022). To combat this, especially in primary schools, consent should be applied to multiple different concepts, including hugging and playing, to demonstrate its relevance across all ages and experiences.

Boys that believe they have entitlement to women's bodies, and strive for dominance (Katz, 2019), are statistically more likely to perpetrate gender based sexual harassment (Setty, 2022). One explanation is that boys often commit sexual assault to gain recognition and inclusion with peers, and to do what is expected of them as 'masculine subjects' (Setty, 2022). Boys and men can be subjected to harassment and assault themselves due to these norms, as they feel they cannot refuse sex due to the hyper-sexualised script that they should always desire sex, and that it will enhance their social status (Setty, 2022). In this study, many boys noted that they do not recall being taught about their own wants and consent, as there is a commonly held belief that boys always want sex, and consent as a concept is a man asking a woman, not the other way around (Setty, 2022). One approach is to ensure both boys and girls are taught about consent in similar ways, as it breaks down the image that boys are simply stronger and more dominant and therefore don't need to be asked for their own consent. It helps turn the concept of consent into a two-way conversation, as opposed to a one-way 'green light'. Whilst structural inequality and power imbalances make it more likely for women to be assaulted, it is important to acknowledge that this does not mean all boys want to

harm girls, and the experiences of individual boys should also be recognised in classroom discussions (Setty, 2023). This is a crucial step in recognising sexual assault and harassment against both boys and girls, without treating it as a joke (Setty, 2022).

Setty (2023) offers recommendations for teaching about the complexities of consent and the role of the law. They emphasize the use of scenarios, the use of discussion to consider the factors affecting consent, the skills needed to think critically about these factors, and how to address them (Setty, 2023). An example scenario for older young people includes:

“Been in a relationship for a few months – haven’t had sex yet but nearly turning 16 so starting to think it should happen soon and friends are starting to ask about whether you’re going to ‘lose your virginity’ to your partner”.

Learners can then discuss what consent looks like and what are the power dynamics or influences that may affect how easy it is to withdraw consent (Setty, 2023). They would consider where pressure comes from, learning that just because they are not being directly forced does not mean they don’t feel pressure, demonstrating that consent is not as simple as a yes or no answer (Setty, 2023).

Educators need to provide young boys and girls with emotional literacy to understand consent is also about feelings, wants, likes, and dislikes, and is also about responding and engaging in intimate interaction, not just verbal interaction (Setty, 2023). To combat toxic masculine norms, Setty (2023) also highlights the importance of giving and receiving rejection. Children must learn to recognise and cope with feelings in non-harmful ways.

Loyalty and being a trusted friend are important within young peer relationships. They form part of the unwritten rules of growing up. Such rules require young people to avoid breaking these rules. Should the rules be broken friendships risk being weakened, isolation from the peer group and even ridicule are likely outcomes.

Navigating early intimate relationships remain a challenge for young people, where some young people don’t see certain behaviours as abusive, but as normal in these

relationships. Active bystandership shows that being a good and loyal friend can sometimes mean telling a friend something they need to hear, not simply what they want to hear. How we redefine loyalty in peer cultures will in some way contribute to the normalisation of such action rather than the action being seen as a transgression against the norm. A form of critical loyalty will help young men do what's right for their friends and within their peer group.

## *Example approaches*

### Men4Change

The Men4Change organisation offers a variety of workshops to tackle toxic masculinity. 'Stepping out of the Man Box' (O'Rourke and Haslop, 2022). The Man Box is a metaphor for how boys and men are socialised into rigid, dominant forms of masculinity which negatively affect themselves and others. Learners are asked to reflect on their own relationship to the Man Box, and their performance of traditional forms of masculinity in online and offline spaces in group discussions (O'Rourke and Haslop, 2022). They begin by outlining supposed traits of men, for example being heterosexual, dominant etc., and discuss how this is not biological, but due to social expectations and pressures (O'Rourke and Haslop, 2022). They then go over common phrases like 'man up' and 'don't be a wimp', and how this may have affected them personally. Other conversations can then be encouraged by educators, for example: Do you think men should step outside the Man Box? What actions could help you step out and develop positive masculinity? They are given scenarios and asked to indicate how they would respond to them and what they think it means to be a good friend, which encourages critical thinking of how masculinity is presented in their own lives (O'Rourke and Haslop, 2022). Additionally, they go through exercises of 'What kind of a man do you want to be?'. This encourages them to think about goals for the future, and how they can navigate growing up into a man in a positive way (O'Rourke and Haslop, 2022).

### It's a man's issue

'It's a man's issue' is an organisation in Australia creating dialogue and education on critical issues around consent, rape culture and toxic masculinity (Rayment, 2024). The organisation aims to empower individuals with knowledge and tools to challenge harmful attitudes and behaviours. In order to show young people how relevant and important these topics are they cite (Australian) statistics including that 1 in 3 girls have been sexually assaulted before the age of 15; 28% of students experience unwanted

sex by the end of high school; and 1 in 5 Australians believe women make up claims of rape or sexual abuse (Rayment, 2024). Their TikTok page provides insight into what the workshops entail. Curtis Rayment, the organisation's founder, begins a workshop by saying:

"I know you guys are good men, I know you are not the ones committing these things, but if 1 in 10 men are raping women, saying misogynistic jokes etc., and the 9 of us say nothing- we may as well not be there"

This is effective as it raises awareness amongst boys of the severity of the problem without personally blaming them, whilst also highlighting the important role they have in tackling gender-based violence. Rayment goes on to explain the 'man box' metaphor, explaining that these characteristics are not necessarily bad, but if you believe this is all a man can be, you are more likely to commit rape or sexual assault, and you are 50% more likely to take your own life. He emphasises that this is similar with the 'woman box', why can't a woman be strong, dominant and financially independent?

"Let's get one thing straight, no-one is saying that masculinity is inherently a bad thing, or you can't be masculine but if you're using masculinity as a false shield to justify your bad behaviour then it's a problem! Healthy masculinity, standing up to your mates and stamping out rape culture in our opinion might just be the most masculine things you can do!"

Another integral part to these workshops is challenging the fear of false accusations, noting that as a man you are 230x more likely to be a victim of rape than to be falsely accused of rape. Whilst a false accusation is horrendous, it is placed in the context that it is highly unlikely to happen. This is effective, as it does not diminish the experience of the individual in attempting to highlight the responsibility of the many. The educator makes known to the group that he gets passionate about the subject, he is not angry with them individually, but at the issue, and he invites the boys to be angry with him.

*Being ManKind*

This organisation's slogan is "Imagine a world where 'Man Up!' means nothing, but 'Be Human!' means everything." 'Being ManKind's book and lesson plans aims to reduce toxic masculinity and improve men's mental health (Being ManKind, 2024). The book contains 40 inspirational stories, including that of Daniel Barnes. Barnes grew up finding gang culture appealing and this became his norm. But over time he realised that he had grown up too quickly, and lost too many friends, and that his next step was to find good people to open up to, and help him discover his potential (Being ManKind, 2024). This shows how strength can be demonstrated in other ways, the strength to stand up to socio-economic barriers, and to stand up to toxic, harmful forms of masculinity. Going through these male stories may be beneficial in settings where educators are predominantly female, yet there is still a need for a male role model to demonstrate healthier masculinity. Research supports male teachers as role models, particularly for boys who may not have strong male figures in their lives. Having male teachers can help boys relate more to school and see education as something that includes and values them (Reeves, 2022).

*Micheal Conroy, 12 Dialogues: Men at Work*

Micheal Conroy offers a 12 dialogues programme, as a practical resource for those working with boys and young men in schools to create a safe space for boys to discuss their conceptions of masculinity, to explore what may be, or become problematic (Conroy, 2024). The 12 themes are: Respect, the 'man rules', being safe, friends, what does money mean? people not objects, control, taking no for an answer, safe and being safe to be around, respect and disrespect in relationships, asking for help, and future me (Conroy, 2024). These discussions are beneficial as they allow young boys and men to discuss these topics without being accused of toxicity, creating a safe space for change.

### *Have a word, Say 'Maaate'*

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, created the 'Have a word' campaign, urging men and boys to call out their male peers' behaviour (London Assembly, 2024). It encourages boys and men to just 'say maaate' next time their friends' behaviour towards women goes too far (London Assembly, 2024). The resources describe what problematic behaviour is, what misogyny is, and how men and boys can approach calling out problematic behaviour. The website includes interactive videos, whereby the viewer watches a group of friends hanging out and making misogynistic comments. It is then the viewers' task to click a button saying 'maaate', to call out the characters' behaviour (London Assembly, 2024). This campaign is beneficial, as it recognises the difficulties of challenging your friends' behaviour and offers a solution for intervention that accounts for the difficulties and alienation that can come from objecting to hegemonic norms in homosocial spaces (O'Rourke and Haslop, 2024).

## Summary of overall recommendations

- Gender roles and norms are reinforced from a very young age, so it is important to address this- there must be a diverse reading list and a range of books available that include both strong male and female characters. Books are an important tool in teaching children about diverse backgrounds, and teaching empathy- it is an opportunity to provide examples of healthier masculine roles. (Refer to pages 10 and 13).
- Educators should not solely provide boys and girls with different toys, there should be a wide range available, and there should be no leading, stereotype-reinforcing comments to the children about which are more suitable for them (Refer to page 11)
- With the growing and evolving role of social media, boys and girls need to be taught how to navigate online spaces, how to spot and think critically about conspiracy theories and figures, for example Andrew Tate (Refer to page 6). This also involves being exposed to positive male role models displaying non-toxic forms of masculinity that they can strive towards (Burrell et al, 2020) (Refer to pages 8 and 17)
- When addressing masculinity, it is important to have unaccusatory conversations, because if boys are constantly labelled as being toxic, this may result in self-fulfilling prophecies, as boys will not feel supported to change their mindsets and therefore act the way they think is expected of them. This is not a productive method. It is crucial to not shame them for entrenched beliefs like victim blaming, the educator must instead identify that these are widely circulated beliefs and reflect on them (Equimundo, 2022) (Refer to page 11)
  - Educators may use Micheal Conroy's 12 dialogues, to have a constructive discussion with young boys, asking what kind of man they wish to be, how to take no for an answer etc. (Refer to page 21)

- Redefining definitions and altering perceptions of what masculinity is, and what it means to be a man is a crucial step away from toxic masculinity- but it is important not to suddenly take away traits that boys will identify with, rather alter them (Burrell et al, 2019) as this will leave boys feeling uncertain or attacked (Candy, 2024) (Refer to pages 10-11)
  - For example, it is okay to be strong, and to strive towards strength, but this can mean having the strength to ask for help when needed, and having the strength to express your emotions (Burrell et al, 2019) (Refer to page 11)
  
- When teaching consent, it is important to teach boys and girls similarly. This breaks down the image that boys are inherently strong and dominant and therefore don't need to be asked for consent. This turns the topic of consent into a two-way conversation, which is beneficial for both boys and girls, as it ensures boys know they are also entitled to say yes or no, as well as turning it into a fluid concept as opposed to simply getting the 'green light' (Setty, 2022) (Refer to pages 14-17)
  - This must be enforced from a young age, therefore within primary schools, but applied to different concepts, for example hugging and playing (Refer to page 14)
  - This also includes the importance of giving and receiving rejection, children must learn to recognise and cope with their feelings in non-harmful ways (Setty, 2023) (Refer to page 16)
  
- Educators must be prepared for defensive responses and offensive comments, and be ready with answers that do not blame individual men, providing examples of positive change to prevent dis-heartedness (Burrell et al, 2020) (Refer to page 13)
  
- Use Wilson et al. (2021) framework (see page 13) in activities to reinforce the redefined structure of masculinity. For example:

- The strength to connect to yourself and others
  - Look at activity 'Exploring gender stereotypes and masculinity through classroom discussion'- statements detailing that it is okay for boys and girls to be friends, and to work and play together
- Being motivated to engage and contribute effectively to society beyond social pressure
  - Look at activity 'Exploring gender stereotypes and masculinity through classroom discussion'- statements including "It's important to stand up for others if they are being treated unfairly"
  - Look to activity "The adventure of Alex and Jesse"- A story-based Gender Stereotype activity'- demonstrates that people of any gender can do anything, both boys and girls can be 'superheroes'
  - Look to activity "Building a strong man"- an activity on positive masculinity'- details positive characteristics of being a man including courage, and sticking up for others (upstander behaviours)
- Being committed to one's values and having the capacity to be flexible around 'emotional restriction' and seek help
  - Look at activity 'Exploring gender stereotypes and masculinity through classroom discussion' - statements including, "it is okay for boys to cry", "it is okay to talk about your feelings" and "Strength involves being able to ask for help"

## **Discussion and conclusion**

When reviewing the discussed literature, the current dominant masculine norms have been shown to influence the wellbeing of both men and women by adversely effecting identity formation, mental health and educational outcomes. Hegemonic masculinity sets rigid expectations of aggression, dominance and independence for young boys, while dismissing emotional vulnerability and empathy (Equimundo 2022, Renold, 2004). These norms restrict the ability to form connections and seek help, negatively affecting boys' mental health, as evidenced by higher suicide rates in men and boys (Candy, 2024). Simultaneously, these ideals marginalise girls, diminishing their ability in areas seen to be 'masculine', and reinforcing their subjugation in both educational and social contexts (Equimundo 2022, Burrell et al, 2019).

Schools have a pivotal role in regulating and reinforcing gender identities through gendered uniforms and seating arrangements that priorities male achievement (Equimundo, 2022). They perpetuate norms that alienate boys who fail to conform to hegemonic norms and neglect the emotional and educational needs of girls. The intersectionality of these issues is particularly concerning, as working-class boys, boys of colour and boys with disabilities face a compound of disadvantages when navigating definitions of masculinity that diminish their lived experiences and identities (Burrell et al, 2019). Girls and other gender minorities are excluded and undermined in these male dominated environments, facing harassment.

The literature shows how educational practice and societal discourses fail to address the root causes of inequality. It is recommended that schools analyse their environments and make changes that don't indirectly and directly fuel harmful gender identities. Including a more diverse reading list that represents strong female characters as well as male, altering their seating plan practices, and the toys they provide in primary schools. A holistic approach is crucial when attempting to dismantle harmful stereotypes whilst expanding the range of healthier masculine identities. Integrating examples of caring and emotionally literate masculinity into curricula and providing male

role models who challenge traditional norms may support boys navigating their identity (Equimundo 2022, Being ManKind, 2024). Teachers should also be provided with training and resources to pass on this information to parents, to ensure they understand their own gender biases and the impact that they have on their children.

The 'It's a man's issue' campaign provides a good example of how to approach the task of discussing the repercussion of 'toxic masculinity' with young boys. Rayment demonstrates how to approach sensitive topics whereby many young men may feel attacked and turn it into an issue they can strive to tackle together. Redefining definitions and altering perceptions of what it means to be a man is also a crucial step away from unhealthy and harmful expressions of masculinity. Providing examples of healthier masculine role models gives boys a framework to strive towards, without being lost in narratives that tell them that they are inherently toxic. When definitions change too quickly, it leaves boys feeling uncertain or attacked (Candy, 2024), therefore qualities like strength and independence need to be altered as opposed to being taken away (Burrell et al, 2019).

The topic of consent must be approached with caution and be given prominence to educate both boys and girls of what is morally required when they enter sexual relationships. Consent education teaches children respect and boundaries, as well as attempting to undo harmful narratives that older boys may absorb in pornography and other media. Ultimately, boys need to be involved in the discussion for productive change to take place, as opposed to being lectured or blamed. There is a need for consistent and restorative practices for schools to have a transformative role in reshaping gender norms and improving outcomes for all pupils, regardless of gender.

#### Further research considerations

In light of discussions arising from the 2025 Netflix series, Adolescence, the role of rejection and its impact on young people would benefit from more research. In particular, the distinct harmful ways boys and girls respond to the negative experience

of being socially rejected or rejected in sexual relationships. For example, by reacting violently towards girls and other boys, or by behaviours that lead to self-harm.

Social withdrawal, noncompliance, and hyperactivity is associated with peer rejection in both boys and girls (Wood et al., 2002), however it was found that, being 'liked' reduced anxiousness of rejection in both boys and girls, whereas being 'disliked' was associated with an increase in angry responses towards rejection expectation in boys only (London et al., 2007). Boys are more likely to experience aggression from those who dislike them, which raises the question about the differences in how rejection is perceived and communicated in girls and boys (London et al., 2007)- an issue that must be addressed in future research.

Richard Reeves offers an insightful quote provoking thought into future research on this topic:

“We’ve made great progress in telling men not to be violent. But we haven’t done enough to help them deal with the feelings—especially humiliation—that can lead to violence.” He goes on to say, “When men can’t fulfill what society (or they themselves) see as meaningful masculine roles—due to job loss, family breakdown, or educational failure—they often feel shamed or humiliated, which can fuel: Social withdrawal; Violence (against self or others); Radicalization or resentment”.

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