

# Breaking the Cycle: Rethinking Male Violence, Risk, Responsibility and Response

This policy brief is intended for the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) and other youth-centered policy makers.

The rise in gender based abuse and violence (GBAV) and online misogyny demands urgent attention. This generation navigates adolescence amid reduced youth provision and rising inequality, and online influencers actively driving radicalisation. Schools and local services critically lack the necessary tools and personnel for effective intervention. Without urgent action, this generation of boys risks growing misogynistic norms, thereby perpetuating cycles of GBAV, leaving young women increasingly unsafe.

This policy brief argues for renewed investment in well-trained informal educators (like youth workers). These professionals are best placed to build the long-term, trusted relationships required to meaningfully challenge harmful norms and break cycles of violence. Recommendations are informed by one of the few recent studies to collaborate and engage directly with 13–14 year-old boys, leading to a co-developed intervention with teachers, parents, and young people.

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## Policy Recommendations:

### > Focus on Qualities of Facilitators, Not Just Curriculum.

As well as asking ‘what works’ when seeking to respond to gender-based violence, we should be asking ‘who works.’ The impact of sex and relationships education depends heavily on how it is delivered and by whom. Facilitators increasingly need to be deeply reflective, gender-aware, and trained to respond to sensitive disclosures. This may require the development of new standards or accreditation for facilitators of sex and relationships interventions.

### > Embed Trusted Adults in School Settings.

Safeguarding and PSHE approaches must be supplemented with non-teaching professionals (such as youth workers) who can engage young men in ongoing, trust-based conversations. [3] This should not be left to overstretched or undertrained school staff. The Department of Education should consider pilot funding for in-school youth work teams in areas where issues around GBAV have been identified.

### > Restore and Fund Professional Youth Work.

There is an urgent need to rebuild the pipeline of trained youth workers in the UK. Youth services have declined dramatically since 2011 [2], and with them, the capacity to build long-term, informal, relational interventions that have been shown to be effective in reducing violence. [4-5]

### > Address Online Influences and Social Media.

Policy responses must engage with the online world where boys receive powerful messages about gender and masculinity. This includes media literacy programmes, targeted interventions, and

better monitoring of online harms. The Government should partner with tech platforms and youth sector organisations to counter online misogyny.

### > Invest in Longitudinal, Qualitative Research.

This study [1] demonstrates the value of qualitative work in exploring complex social phenomena like masculinities and GBAV. Policymakers should commission more research and evaluations that listen closely to young people to inform more nuanced responses designed with young people, teachers, and parents.

## Policy Context

The Netflix series *Adolescence* has refocused public attention on safeguarding failures and male violence, echoing longstanding concerns about rising misogyny among teenage boys. Despite government recognition (via the National Youth and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategies) there is still a major gap between national policy and action.

Young people today are navigating adolescence in the context of reduced youth provision, rising inequality, and online radicalisation. Influencers such as Andrew Tate and the fallout from movements like #MeToo and Everyone’s Invited have shaped how teenage boys and girls understand relationships, gender, and power.

Schools and local services are increasingly under pressure to respond yet but often lack the tools or personnel to do so effectively.



## Research Summary

Intensive research with 13–14-year-old boys on sex, consent, and relationships [1] revealed widespread confusion regarding consent, entrenched misogynistic attitudes, and a lack of trusted adult support. The project is one of the few studies in recent years that has spoken directly and intensively to this cohort and highlights urgent policy needs for education and youth work.

## Research Design

Dr Harris (an ex-street-based youth worker) and a female colleague, Harriet Cutler used participatory action research (PAR), a method that values knowledge gained through collaboration with participants. The researchers worked with teachers, parents, and young people to co-design a 6-week program. Group discussions were conducted with twelve 13-14 year old boys to explore the gendered nature of violence. The research prioritised the boys as co-producers of knowledge, capturing their situated expertise on masculinity, experienced harm, and systemic responses. This collaborative approach allowed for deep observation of both surface attitudes and underlying emotional currents.



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## Key Findings:

- **Misogyny and Objectification.** The boys expressed worrisome attitudes toward girls and young women, including casual misogyny and objectification. These views often reflected what they had seen online or heard from peers.
- **Young Men Are Caught in Contradictions.** Alongside bravado and bluster, boys expressed deep confusion, and anxiety about what sexual consent means in practice. Many feared being wrongly accused and felt unsure how to act around girls. Consent was often viewed in legalistic terms.
- **Limited 'models' of masculinity.** Boys revealed underlying insecurities about identity, masculinity, and relationships. They lack alternative visions of masculinity, leaving them confined to narrow, harmful stereotypes that discourage empathy, respect, and healthy relationships with women and peers.
- **Systemic Gaps in Education and Support.** Teachers were often uncomfortable or ill-equipped to engage in open conversations about sex and relationships. The research points to a lack of trusted adults who can build meaningful relationships over time and challenge harmful norms without alienating the young people they support.
- **Cultural Complexity and Intersectionality.** Varying cultural attitudes toward gender roles and intersecting dynamics added complexity to boys' experiences of masculinity and sexuality.

## References

- [1] Harris P. (2025) 'The case for a psychoanalytically and socially literate approach to sexual consent education for young people'. *Journal of Psychosocial Studies* (pending publication).
- [2] House of Commons Library (2024) *Trends in Funding Levels for Youth Service*. London: House of Commons Library.
- [3] Harris, P. (2019) 'Down with the kids'? *Examining the male youth worker as a role model and mentor to young men involved in violence*. Youth & Policy.
- [4] Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2024) *Youth provision and life outcomes. Systematic literature review. A Youth Evidence Base report by SQW and the University of Warwick for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport*.
- [5] National Youth Agency (2023) *NYA Policy Paper. Lifting Young People up through Youth Work*.