

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# **NURTURING GENDER-EQUITABLE MASCULINITIES**

## **LESSONS FOR TRANSFORMING NORMS THROUGH EDUCATION SYSTEMS**

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## Overview

This report *Nurturing gender-equitable masculinities: lessons for transforming norms through education systems* discusses how formal education systems, especially in low- and middle-income countries, can more effectively nurture gender-equitable values, particularly among boys. To answer this, the report probes the following questions and issues:

1. What approaches to nurturing gender-equitable values with students and teachers have proved effective and why?
2. Are there lessons from broader education for social change<sup>1</sup> with relevance to gender-transformative education?
3. How can education systems better support promising approaches at scale?

## Why is this report needed?

Attitude surveys show reduced support for gender equality among boys and young men in some contexts, compared with older generations (Betts Razavi, 2024). The growing presence of misogynistic content in the digital sphere, not least social media platforms used by young people, amplifies young people's exposure. A common response to the rise in popularity of misogynistic online influencers is to call for content on gender-equitable values to be included in school curricula, with the hope that, by 'catching students young', support for sexist and misogynistic views can be 'nipped in the bud'.

Schooling has long been recognised as a critical space where gender-equitable values may be nurtured among both boys and girls, but also one that can reinforce gender stereotypes and inequitable norms (Stromquist, 2007; Unterhalter, 2019). Gender norms, like other topics, are shaped by both the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum – the values and attitudes transmitted by teachers and other students – and through the school's gendered practices and procedures, such as dress codes or assignment of chores.

Despite continuing inequalities in access – 250 million children and young people were denied education opportunities in 2023 (UNESCO, 2023) – formal education reaches young people at scale and is at its heart a space intended to support students to develop new knowledge, skills and values. It therefore holds the promise of catalysing a generational shift towards more gender-equitable values. The evidence presented in this report shows that this is not just a promise, but that there are actual, evaluated examples of transforming education systems to strengthen gender-equitable attitudes and behaviour.

This is all the more impressive given that a constellation of forces both within and outside education systems make this a challenging task. Systemic underfunding of education means that classes are often overcrowded and teachers underpaid and demotivated. Particularly at secondary school level, pressures to prepare students for high-stakes exams can reduce curriculum time available and teachers' and students' motivations for non-examinable subjects. Teachers' 'invisible pedagogical mindsets' often

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<sup>1</sup> Education for social change refers to human rights and peace education, and equality-focused education, such as anti-racist or LGBTQI+ inclusive education.

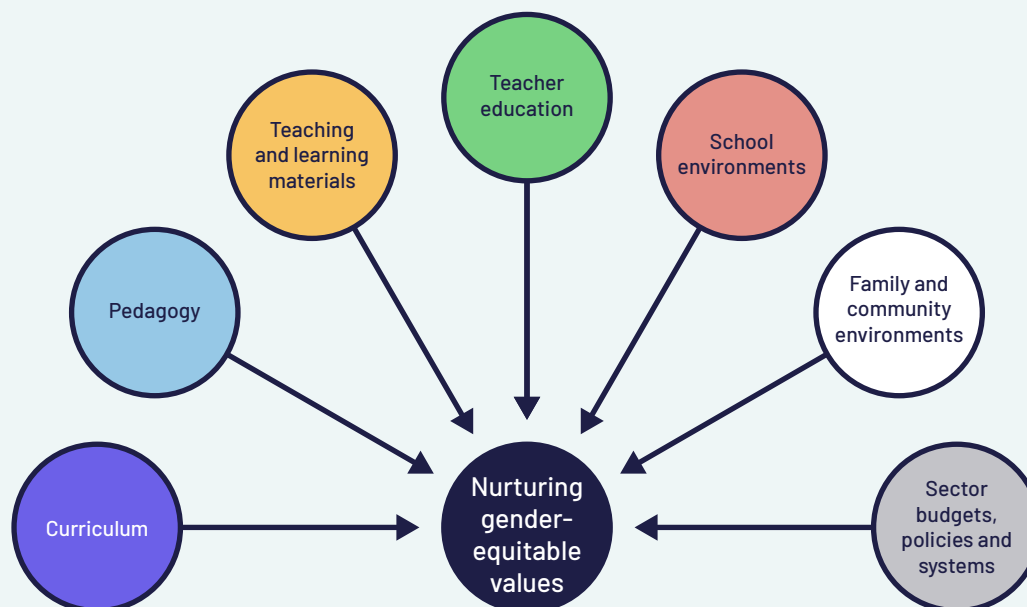
favour a more teacher-centred ‘transmission’ model of learning (Qargha and Dyl, 2024). On top of this, growing mobilisation of anti-feminist movements is generating a more hostile environment for gender equality education, some of which is taking the form of increasingly organised campaigns and attacks (D’Angelo et al., 2024).

Given this often challenging context, the report has tried to identify what has proven to be effective to promote gender-equitable values through formal education. It extends existing knowledge on gender-transformative education, through focusing on:

- evidence on how to work more effectively with boys to transform masculinities
- insights from the broader literatures on education for social justice, and on teacher professional development
- formal education
- system transformation to achieve change at scale.

It is organised around the following key entry points (Figure 1): curriculum, pedagogy and teaching and learning materials; teacher education and training; and supportive ‘ecosystems’, such as education policies and systems, schools and community-level environments. It examines the evidence for key actions and approaches at each level.

Figure 1: Entry points to nurture gender-equitable values



## Methodology

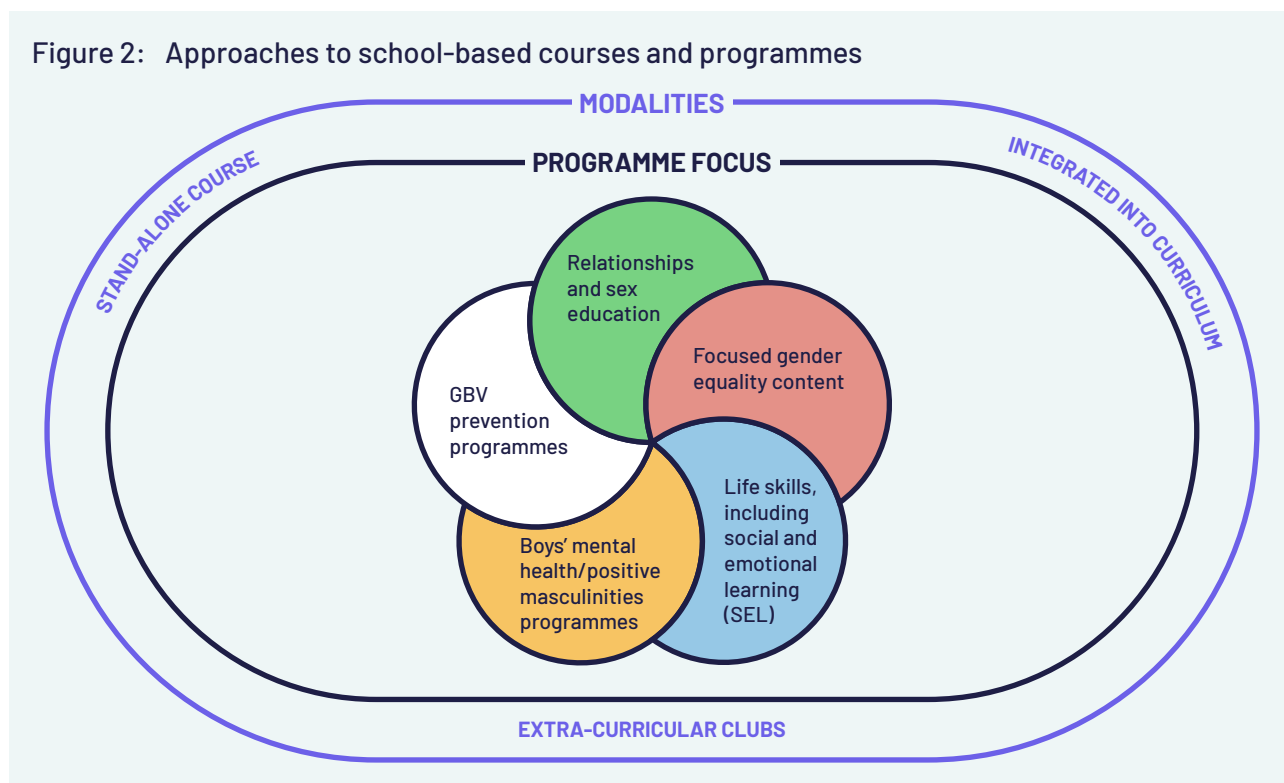
The report is based on a comprehensive literature review of academic and grey literature published since 2010 and eight interviews with practitioners about effective practices for working with boys to advance gender equality and transforming education systems at scale. It also draws on detailed analysis of 19 evaluations of initiatives that aimed to nurture gender-equitable values and practices among students or teachers. The evaluations covered 22 initiatives spanning four world regions.

The report focuses on primary and secondary education, the levels of education systems for which most evidence is available. It focuses principally on efforts to prevent misogyny and sexism, recognising that these are distinct from, but often tied to, homophobia and transphobia. The report focuses on experiences in low- and middle-income countries, with a focus on approaches and solutions that may be relevant in low-resource contexts.

## Key insights

### Curriculum, pedagogy and learning materials

Figure 2 summarises thematic foci and modalities of the initiatives examined. The two most common programme foci were relationships and sex education, and prevention of gender-based violence (GBV).



Thirteen of the programmes examined led to measurable changes in boys' attitudes. These programmes spanned all three main modalities and programme foci shown in Figure 2. The evaluations of six initiatives found changes towards more gender-equitable behaviour, with boys often reporting taking on more domestic chores and, in four cases, reduced bullying or increased intention to intervene if witnessing gender-based violence. What these six programmes had in common was an explicit focus on gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and use of participatory learning strategies. All but one also used a whole-school approach, mainstreaming equitable values into school practices and emphasising them as a core element of the school environment.

The following approaches and processes have proved particularly important in catalysing change.

### Curricula and learning materials

**Creating time and space for critical reflection on gender norms.** The importance of creating space for regular, and deep reflection on gender norms and stereotypes cannot be overstated. In contexts where masculinity increasingly carries 'negative connotations', positive masculinities workshops provide space to reflect on students' own values, and those of high-profile public figures, such as influencers, musicians and sports stars, and allow boys to discuss and process issues they may be grappling with.

**Balancing practical information and skills, and reflective space.** While curricula that include content on gender and power may lead to more transformative change, it is often the more practical and applicable curriculum content that students seem to value most. The studies reviewed found that students particularly appreciated factual content on their changing bodies, sex and relationships, and opportunities to plan for their future or practise communication skills.

**Content that is contextualised and relevant to young people's lives.** In 2024 this should not need saying. However, and particularly in low-income countries, transplantation of materials without sufficient adaptation to context, remains common. While it makes good sense to build on materials that have been tried, tested and refined, often over several years, adapting them to different contexts is equally important, as shown in the experience of Taaron ki Toli in different Indian states. This may mean shortening or simplifying some tried-and-tested approaches. Designing curricula so that modules can be replaced and new materials added where necessary can help ensure their relevance across diverse contexts. Engagement with key stakeholders, including young people, is an important part of this process.

**Don't start with a frontal attack or with gender equality. You have to point out to the boys that we care about them and we want them to thrive. You have to build empathy and show them it's not about boys vs girls, but it is a structural issue. Patriarchy is the villain, not them.**

Dr Urvashi Sahni, Study Hall Educational Foundation, India



## **Pedagogies and teachers' practices**

Even the most ambitious gender-transformative curriculum is unlikely to achieve much change without teachers who are both trained in the subject matter and approach and committed to nurturing gender equality values. Some key insights around effective classroom practice include:

**Importance of engaging emotions.** Processes of personal transformation of this kind may be emotionally charged and teachers/facilitators need to be attentive to the powerful emotions that can arise. Engaging emotions is often a necessary part of change processes, which may be more likely to stick than processes engaging students cognitively alone (e.g. by providing information or how-to tips alone).

**Careful framing of tone and overt and underlying messages.** Facilitators need to balance affirming boys' identities as (different groups of) young men, who may hold inequitable gender norms, while challenging them to think differently about masculinities and gender. This requires facilitators to walk a careful line between accepting participants as they are, while challenging misogynistic or other discriminatory content.

**Participatory approaches can help foster positive peer relationships and develop more equitable norms among peer groups,** whose members can encourage each other to put new norms into practice. Role-play and group discussions provide opportunities for students to practise gender-equitable and respectful communication, which they can use in family life and intimate relationships. These approaches are likely to engage students more, and thus make the content more memorable. This is particularly important in a context where learning at school is competing with messages from online influencers presented in a more entertaining and youth-oriented way.

**Managing resistance.** The interviews undertaken as part of this study suggest that resistance and disengagement can usually be reduced through participatory activities and through respectful engagement of participants. Helping boys recognise how patriarchal norms negatively affect them, as well as girls and women, may help bring them on board and can catalyse their commitment to change.

**Mixed or separate gender groups.** Mixed gender groups can help foster egalitarian relationships between girls and boys, but it is also important that boys have opportunities to discuss sensitive topics in same-sex/ gender settings. Some initiatives separate students by sex (or gender) for specific topics, and then bring them together to share perspectives. Where students in mixed schools attend gender-specific sessions, it is important that both groups are offered broadly similar activities and content, focused around gender and relationships, to avoid reinforcing perceptions of boys or masculinities as 'problems to be fixed'.

## **Teacher education and training**

Despite the critical importance of skilled teaching and facilitation to nurture gender-equitable values, the proportion of teachers who are exposed to content on gender equality or gender-equitable teaching as part of their professional training and development is very variable, as is the depth, content, and quality of this training. Evaluation evidence is very limited (only three studies were found) and is skewed towards externally funded, rather than 'home-grown', initiatives developed by universities and teacher training institutes.

Further, little research has explored how teacher education for gender equality is most effectively delivered. From the studies reviewed, the following promising approaches and enabling factors stand out:

- **Integrating gender equality curricula and accompanying resource materials** into both pre-service and in-service education is essential to scale gender equality education from pilot initiatives into a whole-system approach. This may be a multi-year process and may require a phased approach.
- **Creating space for teachers to reflect critically on social and gender norms** is an essential part of preparing teachers to teach content on gender equality. Without this, teachers often struggle to maintain commitment and to put values into practice. Lessons from human rights and peace education highlight the importance of teachers having a good understanding of different perspectives and working through difficulties and disagreements they may have with the content before they are required to teach it.
- **Sufficient time must be allowed for this process of personal transformation** before moving to tips, tools and resources for putting values into practice. In longer processes (e.g. courses that run over several months), action research can help teachers understand gender dynamics in their schools and local environments and see challenges ‘with new eyes’ from students’ perspectives.
- **Sustained support for teachers is required**, for example, through peer support networks/communities of practice, in-service ‘top up’/refresher training, and good quality readily available resources. Emerging models such as regional hubs and resource centres providing ongoing support may be more effective than ‘cascade’ models, where selected teachers receive training which they must share with colleagues and learning is often diluted.

### Supportive educational ‘ecosystems’

Education systems are embedded in their social contexts. Developing a supportive ecosystem for gender-transformative education requires actions with stakeholders at multiple levels. These include:

**At family and community level.** It is important to work with families and community stakeholders (including religious leaders, where relevant) to promote shared values, encourage more gender-equitable practices, ensure families are informed as to what their children are learning, and pre-empt resistance and backlash, related in part to misinformation about curriculum content. Positive examples include Aahung’s work in Pakistan, and Breakthrough’s work and the Udaan curriculum in India.

**At school level.** School leadership plays a critical role in establishing and promoting gender-equitable values, and setting the expectation that teachers and other staff will do so. This points to the importance of training for school leaders as well as teachers tasked to teach gender equality curricula. Experience both in gender equality and broader social justice education highlights the importance of ‘whole-school’ approaches that mainstream equitable values into school practices, and emphasise them as a core element of the school environment. Efforts to eradicate gender-based violence in schools have often been at the forefront of action to implement whole-school approaches. Key elements include: training and awareness raising for all staff and students to change norms about acceptable behaviour, and developing reliable reporting and response mechanisms, and outreach to families and communities.



**At education system and policy level.** Work at this level is needed to strengthen alignment of different aspects of the education system, delivery capacity and supportive policy. Some key actions include integrating gender equality courses into mainstream school curricula, through specific subjects, such as life skills or citizenship education, or as modules across subjects such as national and foreign languages, history or maths, etc. Including gender equality content in student assessments (e.g. end-of-year exams) may help raise commitment to teaching and learning this content. Effective integration requires that teaching for gender equality forms part of teachers' pre- and in-service education and training, and is reflected in teacher competency and evaluation frameworks.

Another key aspect is building effective delivery systems for gender equality curricula through training, clear roles and systems for monitoring implementation and for quality assurance. This means, for example, training school inspectorates and district education authorities so that they are able to identify any gaps or weaknesses in implementation and support schools to rectify them. Building these robust systems requires political leadership and commitment to mobilising and sustaining resources over a long-term period (10-15 years or more). In low-income countries, strengthening education system capacity implies the need for enhanced and long-term funding commitments from international donors.

Policies and plans that provide the framework for roll-out and implementation can be helpful in galvanising commitment but are no substitute for committed political leadership at all levels. Alongside community-level engagement and media outreach, positive public endorsement and clarification of the value of gender equality curricula can help counter misinformation and mobilisation by gender-restrictive actors. Complementary actions in other sectors, such as regulation of misogynistic social media content, also have a vital role to play.

### **Areas for further research**

Finally, initiatives and systems to nurture gender-equitable masculinities through formal education are relatively new; there remain a number of knowledge gaps for effective policy and practice. Evaluations – particularly of large-scale policies and initiatives – are scant, with a particular gap in knowledge about how to effectively prepare teachers to promote gender-equitable values through mainstream teacher education systems. Some priorities for operational research to underpin more effective practice include: understanding design issues, such as the optimal lengths of gender equality modules for students and in teacher education; and learning from efforts to integrate gender equality content into formal assessments, such as examinations, and accountability structures, such as school inspections.

For references, please see the full report, available at: [alignplatform.org/resources/report-nurturing-gender-equitable-masculinities-through-education](https://alignplatform.org/resources/report-nurturing-gender-equitable-masculinities-through-education)

# ALiGN

## About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms.

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