

Researchers: Tackling online misogyny—what needs to be done in UK schools and communities

April 4 2023, by Louise Mullany, Loretta Trickett and Sally Bashford-Squires



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

[Research](#) from the Children's Commissioner for England has found that 79% of children have encountered violent pornography before they are 18. [One-third of young people](#) have reported receiving nude videos or

photographs, with more than half sent from strangers.

There has also been a dramatic rise of hyper-masculine social media influencers, causing alarm among [teachers and teaching unions](#). These influencers are exposing boys to violence against women as a form of biological entitlement, based on their view that males are an inherently superior sex.

Access to this online material has been [linked by teachers](#) to increases in [sexual assault and misogynistic behavior](#).

[Research](#) by two of us (Mullany and Trickett) investigating [misogyny hate crime](#) recommends education as a key way to tackle the root causes of misogyny. There have been calls from the [National Police Chief's Council](#) to teach [younger children](#) in [primary school](#) the risks and harms of online misogyny, which aligns with our recommendations. [Improving communication](#) between schools and families is crucial so that messaging and advice about online misogyny is consistent.

On the curriculum

UK pupils are taught about [harmful stereotypes online](#) in relationships and sex education (RSE), [health education](#), citizenship and computing. However, a recent survey in England by [The Sex Education Forum](#) reported that 54% of surveyed students said they had not been taught enough or had not been taught at all about healthy relationships online.

Events such as [Safer Internet Day](#) can do good work in schools. But focusing on this issue one day a year is not enough to address a problem which negatively affects the health, well-being and learning opportunities of young people every day. There is not the space in the current national curriculum to examine and critique online misogyny in the detail it desperately needs.

Young people of all genders may find it difficult to [talk to adults](#) about personal and embarrassing topics, including their bodies, sex and relationships, which can make reporting online misogyny difficult. [Victim-blaming](#) of girls in schools may lead them to avoid reporting misogyny online and offline. Victim-blaming feeds into a lack trust in authority figures into adulthood. The [under-reporting of rape and sexual assault](#) is well-documented.

The emphasis on individual responsibility also downplays the role that peer groups and bystanders should play. [Recent initiatives](#) in higher education include bystander training and "allyship," which make it everyone's responsibility to intervene and question if they witness misogyny online or offline.

It's not just in RSE, but across the curriculum that misogyny should be addressed. All subject areas use online spaces and platforms as e-learning tools, and these are places where misogynistic content can be easily shared.

Misogyny can be found within [online learning resources](#). Platform providers have a direct role to protect children and all users online. Ongoing revisions to the [Online Safety bill](#) present the opportunity to make providers take more social and legal responsibility for the content they offer for profit.

The UK government is [reviewing guidance](#) on RSE in England during 2023. This presents an opportunity to make the problem of online misogyny more prominent and change the way it is taught. New resources to tackle misogynistic social media influencers are in [significant demand by teachers](#).

Many ways to be a man

There are [multiple versions of masculinity](#) which differ from the narrow stereotypes frequently portrayed online which portray men as violent, unemotional and macho. These alternative ways of performing masculinities need to be taught in schools, so that the simplistic ways social influencers act out extreme masculinities online can be critiqued and replaced with knowledge of healthier identities and relationships.

Organizations such as [Beyond Equality](#) run male-led workshops in schools to rethink dominant, macho masculinity. Workshops like this can create spaces for honest conversations without judgment. Students unpick stereotypes and are taught different ways of performing masculinities.

At a primary [school](#) level, there is a [lack of male teachers](#) who can act as positive role models. Far more should be done to actively encourage men to enter the teaching profession at this level.

What's more, it should not be the responsibility of schools to do all the work. Addressing online misogyny is a community-wide responsibility. Parents, caregivers and others who play central roles in children's lives and activities—such as [sports clubs](#), community groups and other youth organizations—also need to take a stance.

This can include working together, in collaboration with schools, to call out misogynistic behaviors and model healthy behaviors online and offline. We need to actively demonstrate how women and girls can be equally respected and valued in society.

The next generation needs guidance from male role models as they make the difficult transition into adulthood. They need support to recognize healthy and unhealthy behaviors and the implications of these for others and for themselves.

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