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Moving beyond masculine defensiveness and anxiety in the classroom: exploring gendered responses to sexual and gender based violence workshops in England and Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Increasing rates of gender-based and sexual abuse, coupled with a rise in misogynistic influencers online, have become a growing issue in UK and Irish schools. This paper reports on the findings of a postlockdown study in England and Ireland that piloted workshops on gender-based and sexual violence. While most student responses were positive, we found that roughly 10% of girls and 20% of boys were resistant. In this paper, we explore these critical responses, focusing specifically on male resistance. Our findings indicate that new strategies, which avoid the concept of 'toxic masculinity', are needed to help boys move from defensive to empathetic engagements. We also find that the neoliberal, meritocratic ethos of many schools has fostered a problematic framing of gender-based violence as genderneutral. We conclude that it is vital to adopt an intersectional, whole-school approach to educating about sexual violence, which acknowledges male victimhood, while also emphasizing gendered privileges.

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Introduction

In the post-#MeToo environment, there has been a significant increase in anti-feminist and male-supremacist movements online (UN 2020; O'Hanlon et al. 2023; Perliger, Stevens, and Leidig 2023), as well as a new strand of 'gender-critical' feminism, which rejects gender as a legally valid category for self-identification. During the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, a 'perfect storm' of pandemic lockdowns, algorithmic mainstreaming of manosphere ideology, and diminished RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) provision left many teachers seeking urgent interventions from NGOs and academics to

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address these problems. Screen time and social media use also increased significantly during this time (Plamondon et al. 2023), with the social media platform TikTok becoming especially popular in 2020. This period saw a significant mainstreaming of anti-feminist and anti-gender ideologies by high-profile influencers on YouTube and TikTok such as Jordan Peterson, Rollo Tomassi and Andrew Tate, as well as various masculinist lifestyle coaches and podcasters (Bujalka, Rich, and Bender 2022). The Manosphere's 'Red Pill' advocates use evolutionary psychology to justify a return to traditional gender roles, with a particular focus on men's sexual entitlement to women. They frequently contest statistics on gender-based and sexual violence, and blame contemporary feminism for a range of social ills, including women's own unhappiness (Ging 2019).

In both the UK and Ireland, teachers and youth workers have begun to witness the impact of this 'gender toxicity' on young people, including boys, girls and gender non-conforming youth across the sexuality spectrum. Concerns have been growing around how heterosexual cis-gendered male students, in particular, are being targeted by the rise in misogynistic discourses and their propagation of harmful sexual behaviours and attitudes, including sexual entitlement to women, transphobia and retrenchment of binary gender roles (Haslop et al., forthcoming; Ringrose et al. 2022). In addition to the harms implicit for heterosexual girls, the rise of anti-gender ideology also has an especially negative impact on LGBTQ youth (Renold et al., 2023). In light of these developments, there is a heightened need for relatable pedagogical interventions that address issues of gender, consent, sexual violence, and particularly tech-facilitated gender-based violence, through a lens that is also attentive to LGBTQ+ identities and rights. However, during the pandemic sex education (called RSE – Relationships and Sex(uality) Education in England and Ireland) provision was minimal, which experts predicted would lead to 'an increase in these negative behaviours, with disproportionate effects on ... vulnerable youth' (Heyes 2020).

To address these challenges following the pandemic lockdowns, we worked with a charitable partner, the School of Sexuality Education, to co-produce educational workshops to address gender and sexual violence in online and offline contexts. Our workshops attempted to explicitly overcome the online/offline binary by including content on gender-based and sexual violence on screens and in school, streets and home (Horeck, Mendes, and Ringrose 2021). Our findings indicate that most schools, staff and students were in urgent need of better support in addressing these complex issues, and were overwhelmingly welcoming of our educational intervention. However, we also encountered a significant minority of critical and resistant responses to our intervention. This 'resistance' points to considerable challenges in creating effective and relatable interventions addressing issues of gender and sexual power dynamics for heterosexual cis-gender boys in particular (Keddie 2022). Below, we critically evaluate research on 'resistant masculinities', and engaging boys and men in gender-progressive pedagogical interventions.

Unschooling cis-gendered heterosexual masculinities?

There is by now an established body of scholarship on masculinity in school cultures and the need to engage boys in gender-equality struggles (Mac an Ghaill 1996; Connell 1996; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2012; Flood 2019). A central concern is the challenge involved

in asking boys and men to acknowledge and confront the power afforded to them by heteropatriarchal power relations. According to Flood (2019), defensive and hostile reactions among boys are commonplace when introduced to concepts of male power, privilege, and entitlement. However, as Connell's (1996) work on hegemonic masculinity has demonstrated, only a minority of boys and men occupy truly hegemonic subject positions, with the majority benefitting from the 'masculine dividend' to varying degrees, depending on how other factors such as social class, ethnicity or sexuality position them in the hierarchy.

Building on this, and considering the recent mainstream problematisation of gender binarism, it is increasingly important to consider sexist attitudes, gendered abuse and resistance to gender-progressive pedagogies through the lens of sexual and gender diversity (SAGD) (Storr et al. 2022) rather than binaries, as well as intersectionally through other categories such as class, race, sexuality, and ability. Thus, while most discussions around sexual consent and gender-based abuse focus on heterosexual cis-gender relations, as this is where most abuse occurs, it is vital to also acknowledge men as victims, as well as dynamics of sexism and abuse within LGBTQ relations. In addition to this, not all cis-gender heteronormative masculinities manifest or are motivated similarly: the 'protest masculinities' (Connell 1996) which arise from racial or class-based exclusion differ from those which strive to protect white male power and privilege, even though their displays of resistance might appear similar.

How then do we approach 'resistant cis heterosexual masculinities' and the issue of gendered power and privilege in the classroom, given multiple and dynamic intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality and individual psychological factors? We contend that this challenge has been rendered even more complex by two recent – seemingly contradictory – developments in the wider discourses on 'healthy boys' and 'saving boys', namely: the widespread acceptance of masculinity tropes such as 'toxicity', and the introduction of gender-neutral language in relation to intimate partner violence. In relation to the first, Chris Haywood (2020) argues that increased gender literacy in public discourse on inequality has resulted in the concept of masculinity becoming both simplified and stabilized. Waling (2023) argues, for example, that masculinity tropes, types and taxonomies such as 'toxic masculinity' and 'healthy masculinity' have become so pervasive that they have been retaken up in academic thought and developed into presumed subject positions for men. In particular, the concept of 'toxic masculinity' has been widely misunderstood as a fixed male character type or assemblage of toxic traits (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) rather than a set of toxic practices that are performed in the pursuit of male dominance. In spite of – or perhaps because of – its widespread, uncritical use by contemporary feminism, Salter (2019) argues that toxic masculinity is an unhelpful concept as it presents male violence and sexism as a fixed set of identities and attributes rather than the product of power structures, relations and behaviours.

On the other hand, and in apparent contradiction to a gender-essentialist direction, there have been increasing moves to introduce gender-neutral language into discourse and policy on intimate partner violence. According to Burrell (2018), the existence of male victim survivors is being used to claim that gender should be disregarded in responses to abuse and to argue for 'gender neutral' constructions of violence and abuse in policy and practice. While the acknowledgement of cis-men and LGBTQ +

people as victims of abuse is critical to understanding gendered power relations, gender complexity cannot be addressed through gender neutrality, which ignores gendered power structures. It also obscures the fact that sexual and gender norms (heteronormativity) are at the heart of interpersonal violence, with adult men's violence against women by far the most common form of domestic and sexual abuse for instance (Walby and Allen 2004). Moreover, 'gender-neutral' education runs the risk of inadvertently promoting and normalizing (as opposed to critiquing) cis – heteronormative and gendered discourses on sex and sexual violence (Mortimer et al., 2019; Setty 2022). In response, Bragg et al. (2018) and Storr et al. (2022) contend that attention should instead be paid to Sexual and Gender Diverse (SAGD) categories of experience, moving the frame away from the identity of victims toward gendered and sexual power dynamics. Interestingly, a desire for a more gender-neutral approach to gender-based and sexual abuse was evident among many of our participants, and has left us still grappling with an old question posed by Elam (1994: 56) as to how we might 'operate within the established terms of sexual difference, examining where those lines of difference have been drawn, while at the same time upsetting the terms and redrawing the lines'.

Given this, it is unsurprising that understanding and devising strategies in response to (predominantly) cis-male resistance to our workshops has been a difficult, messy and often uncomfortable process. According to Keddie (2022), engaging boys in gender-transformative pedagogy necessarily involves 'difficult knowledge' and 'pedagogic discomfort'. Following a body of research exploring 'affective intensities', resistance and possibilities of rupturing intersectional power relations in schooling (Ringrose and Renold 2014, 773; Dernikos et al. 2020), Keddie argues for the importance of paying attention to and engaging with the complexities and intensities of emotion in classroom contexts. However, it is precisely when such 'pedagogies of empathy' (Keddie 2022) call attention to privilege and gendered power that the most acute discomfort usually arises. As she (2022, 411) asserts, challenging boys' investments in masculine power and entitlement 'may incite resistance and alienation and shut down important conversations about gender'. In addition, teachers and classmates who seek to engage boys in gender-transformative discussions frequently try to avoid discomfort. In a study in which she examined the efforts of female students to include boys in their gender justice consciousness-raising, Keddie (2022, 7) found that the girls were primarily concerned with ensuring the boys' comfort, which 'led to a tempering of their passion for gender justice so as to avoid coming across as attacking and blaming boys'. How to work productively with teacher and student discomfort thus remains key to developing successful strategies for tackling male privilege and entitlement in contexts where boys feel victimized and disempowered. As Keddie asserts (2022, 407), 'if conversations about gender justice are driven by concerns with boys' comfort, they will be unlikely to see gender equity as an issue that pertains or matters to them.'

Issues of discomfort and resistance are further complicated by the troubling of the categories of girl and boy, particularly when we approach masculinity through an intersectional lens that is attentive to SAGD. This is especially the case when 'subordinated' or 'protest' masculinities (Connell 1996) are the most resistant to gender-progressive ideas, yet have genuine claims to oppression along lines of class and race, and thus

intersect with cis-heterosexual masculinity formations. Following Haraway (2016), Camangian (2021) urges educators to ‘stay with the trouble’, rather than avoiding the ‘complicated, messy and difficult’ work of giving oxygen to intersectional conflicts in the classroom. Working with a group of Black and Latinx students in an American urban context, he allowed the performances and perspectives of some black male students, who were influenced by misogynistic aspects of rap culture, to be challenged by their black women classmates. By allowing a resistant student to explain his sexist views, Camangian (2021: 353) encouraged the class ‘to engage with the gender battle too often unnamed in schools despite being such a central part of their connection, and disconnection, to one another’. This process facilitated an alternative understanding of toxic behaviours, as the result of class-based and racialised exclusion, opening up spaces for the other students to challenge these views, while simultaneously understanding them as coming from a place of multiple, intersecting oppressions. These perspectives on discomfort and resistance around cis-heterosexual masculinities, and holding space for masculinities as multiple, complex and intersectional, help us to re-consider moments of resistance and conflict in our workshops less as failures and more as opportunities to engage constructively and dialogically with male defensiveness, victimization, and vulnerability.

Methodology

This paper is part of a broader cross-national study conducted in England and Ireland, in 2021 and early 2022, which explored young people’s experiences of (TF)GBSV (tech-facilitated gender-based and sexual violence) and their responses to workshops designed to tackle this issue.¹ Based on the findings of a survey with over 735 young people (550 England, 185 Ireland) on gender and sexual online risks and harms, we co-produced 2 h-long workshops with the award-winning charity School of Sexuality Education (SSE) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) (See Ringrose et al. 2023). Our survey indicated that girls experienced more online harms than boys, and that LGBTQ+ students experienced more online harms than heterosexual students. It also found that roughly twice as many girls as boys experienced digital harassment of a sexual nature, including heightened experiences since COVID-19. We used these findings and other statistics from NGOs to develop the workshops: Workshop 1 ‘Sexual and Gender-Based Violence’ focused on understanding sexual violence in online and offline contexts; while workshop 2 ‘Activating for Change’ looked at issues of social justice, activism and bystander approaches.² We subsequently observed the delivery of the workshops in 10 schools (8 in England and 2 in Ireland), conducted pre- and post-workshop surveys (with over 860 young people) and held focus groups of 30–45 min (10 in Ireland and 24 in England) with 207 students to explore their experiences of the workshops.³

In this paper, we report on findings from observations of workshop 1 ‘Sexual and Gender Based Violence’ and the focus group data related to this workshop. Despite the overwhelmingly positive responses from the majority of participants, we are convinced that it is vitally important to pay close attention to the ‘resistant’ and critical perspectives of this minority of students, with a view to developing more effective, inclusive and intersectional strategies in future.

Workshop 1 educates students about different forms of sexual and gender-based violence, both on- and offline. A key element is showing how some forms of violence are legally recognized and others are not. Other workshop elements include: the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence experienced by girls/women, boys/men and LGBTQ + people; and a video featuring girls’ experiences with street sexual harassment. The workshop also deals explicitly with cis-heteronormative masculinity through a discussion of male underreporting of sexual violence.

Underreporting of Sexual & Gender-Based Violence



- ▣ Only 5% of young people told their parents/carers about their experiences of image-based sexual harassment & abuse, and a mere 2% reported it to their school (Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021).
- ▣ 37% of gay and bisexual men felt they could not speak to anyone after experiencing sexual assault and only 14% reported their experience to the police (SurvivorsUK, 2021).
- ▣ **Why do you think some people struggle to report sexual and gender-based violence?**



Slide 11 of ‘Sexual and Gender Based Violence’ Workshop: ‘Under-reporting of sexual and gender based violence’ <https://ascl.org.uk/Microsites/IBSHA/Resources>.

Masculinities and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence



The Idea that being a ‘man’ = strong, dominant, sexually assertive

Leads to...

- ▣ Some boys and men participating in sexual and gender-based violence, and rape culture
- ▣ Some boys and men underreporting sexual and gender-based violence

Societal ideals of masculinity negatively impact everyone - including boys and men.



Slide 12 of ‘Sexual and Gender Based Violence’ Workshop: ‘Masculinities and Sexual and Gender Based Violence’ <https://ascl.org.uk/Microsites/IBSHA/Resources>.

As shown, the workshop also covers the intermeshing of online and offline gender and sexual based violence and failures to report. We used a range of scenarios, including ones

that address LGBTQ + identities as below:

Scenario 5

Nathan's friends are **sharing nudes** of girls in a group chat. He **feels uncomfortable** with this, but doesn't speak up because he is afraid they'll call him **'gay'**.

1. Does this count as image-based sexual abuse? Why?
2. What role does sexual orientation play in this scenario?

Slide 21 of 'Sexual and Gender Based Violence' Workshop: 'Scenario 5' <https://ascl.org.uk/Microsites/IBSHA/Resources>.

In England, the workshops were piloted with entire year groups of between 150 and 200 young people, either year 9 (aged 13-14) or year 10 (aged 14-15), typically in classrooms of about 20–30 students at a time. We observed 46 of these workshops delivered by facilitators from our charitable partner, SSE, to approximately 800 young people in eight different types of schools across England, including two schools in London comprising highly-diverse and under-privileged student bodies (with over 40% of students receiving free school meals). Following the workshops, we conducted 24 focus groups with 147 students, including with youth advisory groups, to evaluate their impressions and reflections on the workshops.

In Ireland we worked with 60 young people in mixed age groups (aged 15-17) in two schools. The workshops were delivered by Teachers who had been trained by the SSE charity. We then conducted 10 focus groups with the 60 students who had participated in the workshops. The focus groups were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Here we are concerned only with comments that were coded as resistant, which were in turn sub-coded into three key themes, namely Discomfort with the inequality of sexual violence, Defensive / resistant masculinities and Constructive critique. We also analysed the observational fieldnotes taken during each of the workshops, identifying the main themes that characterized the workshop delivery and discussions. In the following, we report on the three key 'resistant' sub-themes.

Findings

In England, approximately 92% of girls and 84% of boys⁴ agreed the workshop had improved their knowledge of sexual violence. The number was similar for digital sexual violence with 90% of girls and 80% of boys agreeing that the first workshop had increased their understanding of digital sexual violence. In Ireland 100% of the girls and 90% of the boys agreed the workshop had improved their understandings of sexual violence and

100% of both boys and girls agreed that it had improved their knowledge on digital sexual violence. Participants expanded upon these experiences in the follow-up focus groups. Most students liked the fact that the workshops were based on relatable scenarios, used videos, had real language like 'dick pics', and used engagement techniques like post-it notes combined with break-out discussion groups.

While this developing sense of empathy was promising, in England 10% of girls and 16-20% of boys disagreed the workshops had improved their knowledge of sexual violence and digital sexual violence. In Ireland, no girls and only 10% of boys disagreed the workshops had improved their knowledge. We speculate that this was attributable to the fact that the two participating schools in Ireland were urban, co-educational and predominantly middle-class and that both had relatively well-developed policies on equality, diversity and inclusion. We categorized the critical and resistant responses to Workshop 1 into 3 main sub-categories, namely (1) discomfort with the inequality of sexual violence, (2) explicitly defensive, anxious and hostile reactions and (3) constructive critiques about inclusivity and men as victims. The quotes below were selected on basis of their representativeness of these themes in both the English and Irish focus groups.

Discomfort with the inequality of gender and (hetero)sexual violence

Despite addressing the reasons behind women and girls' heightened experiences of violence and low reporting from gay, bi and heterosexual boys and men in our workshops, a minority of students, primarily boys, commented that there was too much emphasis on girls as victims of heterosexual violence and boys as perpetrators, and that there was a need for *equal* representation:

Craig: I think it would be a good thing as long as it shows men and boys as well. Because woman experience it more and they're more likely to, but then it's also 50% or something of men ... (Boy, Focus Group, England)

Interestingly, despite the explicit discussion of statistics and issues of masculinity and underreporting in the workshop, Craig asserted that '50% of men' experience sexual abuse. When asked why they took issue with the focus on girls and women's experiences of sexual violence, some participants said that it ignored male victimization and female perpetration. One boy in England felt it was unfair that men's experiences of harassment are often 'overlooked' and 'not seen as serious', stating: 'there's some men who get harassed by women, and people wouldn't believe it because it's a man', despite the extensive discussion of gay and bisexual men's experiences of male violence and lack of reporting that took place in the workshop.

There were also some instances where girls promoted teaching a workshop that addressed girls' and boys' victimization *equally*:

Julie: I think it should be taught on both sides, because I do know a lot of girls and women who have also sexually assaulted men, and that really does upset me. So I do believe, even though it may be mainly men who are targeting women, I think it should be taught as equal (Girl, Focus Group, England).

Sophie: Like, there wasn't much about rape happening to men, especially rape happening to men by women. They were mostly focused on the men doing it. I guess that's what happens most of the time. But it does happen and I think if there was a guy in

the class and it happened to him, he might feel a bit invalidated that it wasn't included (Girl, Focus Group 3, Ireland).

Other girls described wanting the workshops to focus more on boys' experiences of sexual violence in order to keep them engaged in the workshop:

- Kirsty: I think some of the boys, in particular the ones who weren't really engaged, were just finding it a bit not really for them. That's what I was saying about more stuff for boys in there because it was mostly directed towards girls, which I think is good because there is more of a problem. But I think that they were just getting a bit bored of the same, saying, just towards women (Girl, Focus Group, England).
- Jenny: Yeah, I think it should also touch on like issues that men face as well. Because I know it tends to happen to women more, but I did find that the guys seemed a bit like, not annoyed, but there wasn't a lot about men (Girl, Focus Group 3, Ireland).
- Niamh: But even just include a video that includes both males and females, just to make it seem that we're not just blaming all the males in the room if they haven't done anything (Girl, Focus Group 4, Ireland).

This discomfort among the girls with confronting the inequalities of sexual abuse and coming to the defence of the boys in the classroom is reminiscent of Keddie's (2022) study, in which many of the girls were concerned with ensuring the boys' comfort, and not appearing to blame or attack them. Such responses may also be attributable to the pervasiveness of neoliberal, postfeminist logics of meritocracy in schools (Ringrose 2012; Pomerantz and Raby 2017; Lee 2023), whereby both students and teachers are keen to signal their support for principles of fairness, inclusion and equality without actually acknowledging underlying power structures. It is also possible that some girls disidentify with victimhood to guard against the heavy affective burdens of sexual victimization in and around schools (Gunnarsson 2018).

This desire for parity was occasionally observed during the workshops, when the teachers asked if it would be the same if the genders in some of the scenarios were different, to which the students unequivocally replied 'yes'. However, when they split into groups and discussed the scenarios in more detail, arguments frequently broke out, which showed that many students did not believe that these issues took place on a level playing field. These gendered power confrontations erupted around three key issues, namely nude sharing, sexual double standards and victim blaming. In one of these discussions in the Irish context, the boys complained that they were unfairly blamed for sharing nudes of their girlfriends (whom they called 'birds', thus reproducing the gendered sexual inferiority under debate) with male friends, whereas if girls did it, it wasn't considered to be as serious. The girls, however, were quick to point out that girls generally did not share nudes of their boyfriends, and that the reputational damage associated with leaked nudes was not the same for boys and girls, which is supported by the extant research literature (Dobson and Ringrose 2015; Mandau 2020; Ringrose and Regehr 2023).

Of note, there were also several boys who challenged the notion of needing to present a 'balanced' approach to sexual violence. For example, in response to his peer emphasizing the need for equal/fair content, one boy stated: 'If you balance it out to make it 50% men in the video and 50% women, it's not true to real life, though, is it?' (England). Similarly, most of the girls understood that boys and men are also victims of abuse, but that

numbers of female victims and male perpetrators (of abuse of all genders) were proportionally much higher:

Siobhán: Because it's kind of what happens in real life. Most rape cases are male-to-female, the female being the victim or survivor (Girl, Focus Group 3, Ireland).

Triggered masculinities? Defensive, anxious and hostile reactions

In addition to this desire for sexual and gender-based violence to be portrayed in an 'equal' and 'balanced' way, a small minority of boys took up a more aggrieved position in relation to the workshop's portrayal of boys and men committing sexual violence. This was most pronounced in two of the English schools, specifically an inner-city London school with a highly diverse Black, Asian, Minority-ethnic (BAME) student population and a 'single sex' 'all boys' school in a wealthy North London suburb, with a higher-than-average socio-economic intake. The most negative reactions were in response to the video, which showed episodes of street harassment in London⁵, claiming that it unfairly *blamed* men:

Jake: But I feel like the way, when we were watching the video, it kind of showed men as all monsters. And then, I don't know, it just showed them as horrible, and you need to be scared of them (Boy, Focus Group, England).

Richie: ... but the main thing I feel like it does is it blames us when we haven't done anything yet ... (Boy, Focus Group, England).

This defensiveness in the 'all boys' school may be partly explained by the fact that single-sex schools have been noted to have more 'gender bias' and regressive masculinity cultures (Reynolds 2021). However, similar sentiments were also observed in some mixed school settings, with boys concerned the workshops were unfairly portraying boys and men as perpetrators or were 'anti-men':

Cillian: When it's mostly girls, it's essentially girls it's happened to. It shouldn't be a negative view but it's very nearly an anti-men view all the time. So, I think it would just level out to just people instead of at men (Boy, Focus Group 8, Ireland).

Although the workshops explicitly attempted to work against an 'anti-men' narrative by addressing masculine norms and the stigma associated with reporting sexual violence, we see again here a desire for the content to 'level out'. In a few instances, even stronger, 'triggered' rejections to the workshops emerged, which resonated strongly with gendered disinformation and Men's Rights Activism discourses (Ging 2019; Sugiura 2021) such as those about false sexual violence allegations and/or 'fake rape':

Grant: I think one of my biggest criticisms about the workshop was how it's constantly hammering into always believe it if somebody says they've been sexually harassed. But there's also the people that will make fake rape charges and things like that *innocent people* would get put in prison. (Boy, Focus Group, England, emphasis added)

Marcus: You see a lot about it's mostly men, it's all men that commit these crimes, but it's kind of misleading because it doesn't really say that it's a small percentage of men. So a lot of people can read it as *all men* have done this.

Alex: Yes, that makes out that *every man is bad* and that they'll all rape someone. (Boys, Focus Group, England, emphasis added).

These comments again came from the ‘single sex’ boys school, drawing attention to the enduring disconnect between ‘not-all-men’ and ‘yes-all-women’ discourses (Phillips and Milner 2017), and the failure of our workshop to overcome this impasse, particularly in some schooling environments where boys are not ‘mixing’ with other genders. While comments such as these can easily be dismissed as the parroting of manosphere rhetoric, we must also consider the possibility that they express real fears and a genuinely felt sense of injustice. As Hayes, Burns, and Egan (2022) point out, these reactions are unsurprising given the tendency of male-oriented educational interventions on consent to emphasize risk and reputational or professional damage rather than an ethics of mutual communication. Countering the affective potency of these articulations of aggrievement will clearly require emotionally sensitive engagement with the complexity of gendered power relations, heteronormative masculinity, and intersectionality of different forms of abuse. As Johnson (2017) asserts, ‘Demagogues encourage audiences to self-identify as victims based on *felt* precarity, encouraging the well-off and privileged to adopt the mantle of victimhood at the expense of those who occupy objectively more fraught positions’. The issue of victimhood thus needs an empathetic space in which to be heard, debated, and also challenged. As was the case in Camangian’s (2021) study, several of the girls and some of the boys in our focus groups indicated that they are well equipped to mount such a challenge:

- Paul: From statistics it is mostly men, so you’re going to have to point that out, because otherwise you’re giving false [information] (Boy, Focus Group, England).
- Layla: A lot of the stuff that I saw the boys getting defensive about was that men are most likely to be the assaulters because a lot of boys I know think that catcalling is okay and it’s not sexual assault ... Therefore, I know a lot of them are getting defensive because they’re like, well, I’ve been doing this all my life (Girl, Focus Group, England)

Here we see Layla insightfully calling out masculine defensiveness, which begs the question of how we bring more attention to such affective resonances in the spaces of educational interventions.

Attending to these complexities, and creating contexts in which we can safely nourish ‘humanizing gendered conflict’ (Camangian 2021) is no easy task. However, in almost all our workshops, the most constructive engagements took place when defensive students were heard, and subsequently challenged by other students, primarily through appeals to empathy. For example, in the Irish context, when a group of working-class boys tried to assert that boys were treated unfairly for sharing nudes of ‘birds’, the other students listened to them respectfully, and explained that the political economy of sexting was not an equal playing field, as nudes are shared by and carry significant social capital for boys in a way that does not apply to girls. By contrast, when defensive students were silenced or ignored, as was the case in an especially disruptive workshop with 14–16 year old boys in one of the inner-city London schools, the potential for learning and empathy was lost. By adopting an empathetic, intersectional approach, it becomes potentially easier to distinguish between disruptive responses that are merely about resisting perceived threats to male privilege, and those which might be genuine requests for recognition and space, as for example with classed or racialised subjects who are questioning the disciplinary logics that seek to regulate them in the classroom and wider public space. In the next section, we discuss the constructive participant critiques which suggested how we might go about ‘de-binarising’ the workshops, addressing heterosexual male victimhood

and vulnerability, and enabling a more intersectional understanding of sexual abuse and harassment.

Constructive critiques about inclusivity and men as victims

Despite our attempts to include LGBTQ+ experiences of gender and sexual based violence, including scenarios and activities working around SAGD, it was not viewed as sufficient by some of the more critically engaged young people, who suggested our workshops needed to better represent ‘all genders’, ‘different genders’ and ‘same sex couples’ (Focus Group, England).

- Shane: Not just sexual harassment, but also gender-based harassment maybe. Because obviously, there’s a lot of different genders out there now (Focus Group 4, Ireland)
- Conor: Because I think, statistically, a lot of trans suffer a lot worse and sometimes downright murder. A lot of the time it just goes under the radar ... because as a society, they’re not treated too well. So maybe, there could be a segment on that (Boy, Focus Group, Ireland)
- Ruby: [the workshop] was mostly talking about sexual violence towards women or gay men. It wasn’t necessarily talking about sexual violence towards straight men or sexual violence towards all genders as a whole. It was very much women and gay [men]. So I feel like it could have been more inclusive to all genders (Girl, Focus Group, England)

Although Ruby’s comment about including ‘all genders as a whole’ is also potentially suggestive of the uncritical desire for parity discussed earlier, these examples point to a keen political awareness among young people of the unique contexts for gender-based violence faced by trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming youth (Ybarra et al. 2022). Similarly, most participants emphasized the need to account for the experiences of sexual minorities in sexual and gender-based violence interventions:

- Interviewer: What do you think about the video in the first workshop yesterday? (...)
- Emma: It was good, but then also it just didn’t really show a big range ... It had different ethnicities and stuff, but it also didn’t have different genders and it didn’t show people of same-sex couples or anything. So it wasn’t fully accurate or it wasn’t different from lots of other videos.
- Regina: It wasn’t inclusive.
- Emma: No. It wasn’t fully inclusive. (Focus Group, England).
- Ryan: So maybe including more of the sexual-orientation side of it would also be useful (Boy, Focus Group 4, Ireland).

These comments align with scholarly critiques of the gap in violence interventions that account for the experiences of minorities, including LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming youth (Crooks et al. 2019), and people of colour (Grimmett et al. 2021). These discussions also highlight, once again, the important task of listening to young people in participatory and rights-based educational research made possible through the workshops and the interviewing process. Many of the girls articulated complex understandings of heteronormative masculinity and boys’ reluctance to report violence or admit vulnerability:

- Sinéad: I think part of it is maybe cultural. There is this pressure on men to be more predatory sexually and to sort of assert dominance in that way. In some ways, it’s a show of power, the fact that you’re showing this person in quite a vulnerable position to a considerable number of people (Girl, Focus Group 10, Ireland).

Lynn: I feel like men also want other men's validation. I feel men want men's validation more than girls would want girls' validation (Girl, Focus Group 4, Ireland).

While some of the scenario-based activities provoked heated debates and occasional flare-ups, the more politicized girls, in particular, were both patient and generous in their attempts to explain these and other concepts to boys who were defensive. Although it is in no way incumbent on girls, LGBTQ+ students or students of colour to educate those who are complicit in their oppression, our workshops show that there is value in letting students 'stay with the trouble'. By observing and engaging with some of the boys' defensive reactions, girls and LGBTQ+ students were able to make suggestions for improvement that went to the heart of masculine peer pressure, the performance of toxic masculinity and taboos on intimacy and emotion, rather than suggesting that the workshops should give everyone equal airtime to make boys feel better.

These suggestions included having more discussion of 'toxic masculinity' related to why boys 'don't speak up' or report violence and challenging the myth of the 'strong man':

Tamara: It's just that the reason men don't report it is because they're seen to be, they like to be a man. They're supposed to be stronger and not viewed as they can be harassed because they're supposed to be the ones that are supposed to enjoy it, because that's what people have said that they're supposed to be (Girl, Focus Group, England).

Another girl usefully pointed out that if the emphasis was on men as enacting violence *against other men* this could help:

Kayla: You could just show in the video just a boy being assaulted by other boys or by their friends and then, if they speak up about it, show that when boys speak up about it, they get made fun of by their friends (Girl, Focus Group, England)

Though they tended to lack the same level of critical awareness, many of the boys were also grappling with the taboo around talking about feelings and seeking help:

Jude: I feel like being a boy at this age, it's like you're being a bit of a wuss going to get help and it's not seen as the thing to do. You're just meant to get on with it and shrug it off (Boy, Focus Group, England).

Daniel: The reason why they don't generally report it as much as women do is because they're expected to fight back (Boy, Focus Group, Ireland).

Here, the boys articulate the pressures that boys face in conforming to a hegemonic masculinity that prioritizes toughness, strength, and the ability to suppress emotion. Some boys also wanted further discussion of positive role models, such as Manchester United soccer player Marcus Rashford. Suggestions also included how boys and men could be taught to be active bystanders and allies when witnessing abuse levied by other boys and men.

Conclusion

Despite limitations of scale, our study strongly supports calls from academics, teachers and policy-makers to find ways to engage with and reach those boys, whose anxieties and feelings of disorientation are being strategically manipulated by various anti-feminist

and male supremacist communities and influencers online. However, achieving this without recourse to the kind of equality narrative or ‘both-sidesism’ that some of the participants called for is a considerable challenge in the current neoliberal schooling context, where narratives of meritocracy clash with unequal power dynamics related to gender and sexuality. How do we balance the affective impact of scenario-based learning with a structural and intersected understanding of privileges and oppressions? To cite Waling (2023, 147), how can educators ‘consider intersectionality in developing programs and initiatives that can attend to intersections of economic, cultural and political challenges boys and men face, while continuing to ensure attention is paid to the gendered privileges men and boys experience at the expense of women and trans and gender diverse people’?

We conclude that, in order to address resistances to gender-equitable pedagogies, we need to understand why misogynistic and sexist views have such appeal. Attachments to masculine privilege are clearly not uniform, but are a complex constellation of socio-economic, cultural and psychological factors. Like Camangian (2021), we conclude that by creating space for disruption, resistance, and debate, we can make room for diverse boys’ vulnerability, anxiety and defensiveness, attending to intersectional complexities of gender, including the gender and sexual diversities so articulately expressed by our interview participants. Moreover, instead of ignoring or silencing the desire expressed by some boys to hold onto forms of dominance, it is important to unpack these desires and identify their diverse origins. Thus, for example, articulations of ‘protest masculinity’ (Connell 1996) that arise from class-based and racial cultural formations can provide us with productive ways of exploring both male vulnerability and solidarity with other socially excluded groups. In particular, helping boys better understand defensive masculinity cultures fostered in ‘all boy’ school settings is important if these boys are to be equipped for more gender-equal futures. By creating more space for active listening, fostering imaginative empathy through scenario work and critical dialogues and allowing students to work through their grievances and disagreements, we hope we can move closer to exploring and supporting both vulnerable and resistant masculinities.

Finally, to navigate the discomfort and ‘affective intensities’ of this work, we need schools to recognize that this is not a one-off exercise but rather one that requires a whole-school approach which addresses school culture, practices, policies and curricula (Joyce et al. 2019). This means that gender justice is not simply taught in the classroom but also fostered at the level of school climate and through a gender-progressive leadership for and commitment to gender justice (Howard and Keddie 2023). It also requires that those who seek to engage defensive masculinities are cognisant of gendered, classed and racialised power dynamics, are self-reflexively engaged and are willing to manage conflict with empathy.

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2. The workshops are available online on our research partner Association of School and College Leaders website: <https://www.ascl.org.uk/Microsites/IBSHA/Resources>
3. The study was granted ethical approval by DCU Research Ethics Committee on 17th May 2021 (DCUREC/2021/087).
4. 4% of the young people defined as non-binary or other, meaning 96% chose boy or girl as self-identifications.
5. The Plan International video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdn15-t7kg0>

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