Reframing masculinity for young men and boys

Dr. Sophie King-Hill

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr. Sophie King-Hill, highlighting the importance for probation and youth justice practice of understanding current constructions of masculinity. Many young men and boys within the criminal justice system have internalised damaging ideals that equate masculinity with control and aggression, with these constructions underpinning behaviours linked to violence, domestic abuse and sexual harm, as well as resistance to authority. The constructions also restrict emotional expression, contributing to poor mental health, substance misuse and reluctance to seek help, further increasing risk and complicating engagement. While the traditional masculine ideals remain deeply embedded, they conflict with modern expectations of empathy, equality and emotional openness, while also colliding with the pressures of adolescence, poverty and marginalisation, leading to further tension and resentment. These tensions have been exploited through the digital world, with online spaces perpetuating misogyny and harmful gender norms.

Through understanding these issues – with appropriate training in place – probation and youth justice practitioners can interpret behaviours accurately through a gendered lens and address root causes rather than symptoms, challenging harmful narratives without alienating and promoting positive identity development. An approach is required which prioritises trauma-informed practice, gender-responsive interventions, intersectional awareness, collaborative working, and digital literacy. Building trust and creating safe spaces for boys and young men to explore alternative healthy masculinities and relationships that value empathy and respect over dominance and collaboration over control is essential, utilising participatory methods to centre boys' and young men's voices and lived experiences. By reframing masculinity and engaging boys and young men as allies in prevention, cycles of harm and violence can be disrupted, ultimately reducing reoffending, and building safer, more inclusive communities.

Dr Robin Moore
Head of Research & Data Analysis

Author profile

Dr Sophie King-Hill is an Associate Professor at the Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham. Her research focusses on the sexual behaviours and assessment of children and young people, sexual health, sibling sexual behaviour-abuse, misogyny, relationships, sex and health education (RSHE), young men and masculinities, and youth voice. Her work is cross-sector and cross-disciplinary, with a strong emphasis on participatory and co-design methodologies involving young people.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

1. Introduction

Probation and youth justice practice operates at the intersection of justice, rehabilitation and safeguarding, requiring professionals to navigate complex social and psychological dynamics that shape offending behaviour. Among these dynamics, masculinity stands out as a critical yet often underexplored factor. Masculinity is not a fixed trait but a socially constructed identity, shaped by cultural norms, historical legacies and contemporary influences. For young men and boys in the criminal justice system, these constructions of masculinity profoundly affect behaviour, decision making and engagement with interventions. Understanding masculinity is therefore not an abstract academic exercise; it is a practical necessity for reducing risk, promoting rehabilitation and fostering safer communities.

Historically, masculinity has been associated with dominance, control and emotional stoicism. These ideals, while increasingly incompatible with modern social realities, persist in ways that create identity conflicts for boys and men. When societal expectations of toughness and invulnerability coincide with the pressures of adolescence, poverty and marginalisation, the result can be harmful behaviours such as violence, coercive control and sexual offending. These behaviours are not random; they are often attempts to assert or maintain masculine status in environments where identity feels precarious. For probation and youth justice practitioners, recognising these patterns is essential for interpreting risk and tailoring interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms. The digital age has amplified these challenges. Online spaces, from social media platforms to gaming communities, are saturated with content that reinforces harmful gender norms and, in some cases, promotes misogynistic ideologies. Damaging influencers have gained traction by exploiting young men and boys' insecurities and framing dominance as the ultimate marker of success. These narratives do not remain online; they shape real-world attitudes toward girls and women, authority and violence, influencing behaviours that practitioners manage daily. Without intervention, these ideologies can escalate into radicalisation, domestic abuse and sexual harm.

Mental health outcomes further complicate this picture. Boys and young men are disproportionately affected by suicide, depression and substance misuse, yet they rarely present as vulnerable, even when experiencing significant distress. A reluctance to seek help is rooted in gender norms that equate emotional expression with weakness, leaving many issues untreated until they manifest in aggression or offending. For probation and youth justice practitioners, understanding this dynamic is crucial for identifying risk and creating psychologically safe spaces where boys and young men can engage with support.

This Academic Insights paper draws on the foundations of the book and associated free resource *Reframing Masculinity for Young Men and Boys: We're in This Together*, combined with the author's extensive professional expertise and a number of research projects she has led that have focused on masculinity, mental health and gender-based harm. It explores the interconnected themes of masculinity, mental health, misogyny, violence and relationships education through the lens of probation and youth justice practice. By synthesising these findings, this paper argues for a gender-informed approach that moves beyond punitive models toward proactive strategies rooted in empathy, accountability and cultural competence. Reframing masculinity and embedding participatory, trauma-informed interventions can enable practitioners to disrupt cycles of harm and support boys and young men in developing healthier identities. These insights are not only critical for reducing recidivism; they are fundamental to building safer, more inclusive communities.

2. Understanding masculinity: why it matters

Masculinity is not fixed or innate; it is shaped by history, culture and social norms (Connell, 1995; Jablonka, 2022). These influences have deep roots that still affect behaviour today. In early hunter-gatherer societies, men were positioned as hunters and protectors, creating ideals of strength, aggression and control (Jablonka, 2022). These expectations became embedded in social structures over time, reinforced by the rise of agriculture and patriarchal systems that gave men authority and power while limiting women's roles (Engels, 1884; Walby, 1990). Although society has changed, these norms persist and continue to shape attitudes toward dominance, status and emotional restraint. Religion and cultural traditions have also historically legitimised male authority, embedding gender hierarchies into moral codes (Woodhead, 2001; Mikołajczak and Pietrzak, 2014). These influences remain relevant today, shaping attitudes toward women, relationships and authority. Control over women's bodies is another enduring feature of patriarchal ideology (Downing, 2019; King-Hill, 2022).

For probation and youth justice practitioners, this matters because many individuals in the criminal justice system still internalise these ideals. Behaviours such as violence, coercive control and resistance to authority often stem from the belief that aggression and dominance are markers of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Walby, 1990). Patriarchal norms also restrict emotional expression, contributing to poor mental health, substance misuse and reluctance to seek help – issues that frequently intersect with offending and rehabilitation (King-Hill, 2022). Understanding this context is essential when working with those whose behaviours may be informed by cultural or religious norms, particularly in cases involving domestic abuse or coercive control. While laws have evolved, attitudes toward autonomy and gender roles often persist, influencing behaviours that practitioners manage daily (Downing, 2019; Jablonka, 2022). Recognising these dynamics helps practitioners address the root causes of offending rather than focusing solely on the symptoms.

In practice, this knowledge enables probation and youth justice practitioners to challenge harmful narratives without alienating, promote positive forms of masculinity that value empathy and accountability, and tailor interventions that reflect cultural and social realities. By embedding a gender-informed approach, those working in the justice system can improve engagement, reduce risk and support long-term behaviour change – outcomes that benefit individuals, families and communities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Walby, 1990).

In summary, understanding how masculinity has evolved, and why it remains a powerful social force, enables practitioners to:

Interpret behaviour through a gendered lens	Recognise how rigid masculine norms can drive aggression, risk-taking and reluctance to seek help
Challenge harmful narratives	Address misogyny, entitlement and peer dynamics that underpin offences like domestic abuse or sexual harm
Promote positive identity development	Support men in reframing masculinity to include empathy, emotional literacy and accountability
Enhance engagement	Build trust by acknowledging the pressures men face and creating safe spaces for dialogue about identity and behaviour

2.1 The current position of masculinity: implications for practice

Masculinity today is complex, fluid and contested, and for probation and youth justice practitioners, understanding this evolving landscape is essential. Many of the behaviours encountered in supervision, violence, coercive control and resistance to authority, are rooted in how masculinity is constructed and performed in contemporary society. Without this insight, interventions risk being superficial or punitive, failing to address the structural and cultural drivers of offending (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; King-Hill, 2025a).

The role of boys and young men has shifted dramatically over the past fifty years. While progress toward gender equality has been significant, boys have often been left without clear guidance or space to redefine their roles (Jablonka, 2022, King-Hill, 2025a). Traditional masculine ideals such as strength, dominance and emotional stoicism, remain deeply embedded, yet they increasingly conflict with modern expectations of empathy, equality and emotional openness. This contradiction creates identity tensions that can manifest in harmful behaviours. From an early age, boys are often taught to hide their feelings and avoid showing vulnerability because they fear being shamed and want to fit in with their peers. This pattern usually continues into adolescence and adulthood, reinforcing harmful ideas about masculinity that make it harder for men to seek help and can lead to aggressive behaviour (Pollack, 1998). For probation and youth justice practitioners, this matters because emotional suppression is linked to poor mental health, substance misuse and violence, issues that frequently intersect with offending and rehabilitation (Kimmel, 2017).

Contemporary masculinity can be described as 'precarious', a social status that must be earned, maintained and constantly defended (Vandello and Bosson, 2013). Unlike womanhood, which is perceived as a permanent state, status in men is seen as fragile and easily lost. This pressure drives behaviours aimed at proving masculinity, such as risk-taking, aggression and sexual dominance. In probation and youth justice practice, these dynamics may present in cases involving violent offences, coercive control and sexual harm. It should also be acknowledged that these dynamics are not always the underlying cause of sexual harm, coercive control, or violence, as such behaviours can stem from a range of complex factors. However, understanding the link between precarious manhood and offending enables practitioners to address root causes rather than symptoms.

The digital world has amplified these challenges. Social media, online gaming and pornography shape young men's perceptions of masculinity, sexuality and relationships in profound ways. Platforms often promote damaging ideals while algorithms create echo chambers that normalise misogyny and harmful gender norms (Sugiura, 2021). Sexting and exposure to violent pornography further reinforce distorted views of consent and intimacy, increasing the risk of harmful sexual behaviours (Brown et al., 2009). For probation and youth justice practitioners, this context is critical. Many boys and young men under supervision have been socialised in online spaces where misogynistic influencers and extremist ideologies thrive. These influences can underpin attitudes that justify violence, objectify girls and women, and reject authority. Interventions must therefore incorporate digital literacy and critical thinking, helping individuals challenge harmful narratives and develop healthier identities.

Young men today navigate conflicting expectations. On the one hand, society promotes equality and emotional openness; on the other, peer cultures and online spaces often reward aggression and dominance. This tension fosters confusion and resentment, particularly among those who feel marginalised or excluded from traditional markers of success (Kimmel, 2017). In probation and youth justice settings, this can manifest as hostility toward authority, resistance

to rehabilitation, or alignment with extremist ideologies. Social scripts around masculinity also shape sexual behaviours. Boys are often framed as initiators and girls as gatekeepers, reinforcing heteronormative norms and limiting dialogue about consent (King-Hill, 2025a). These dynamics can contribute to harmful sexual behaviours and coercive control, issues that practitioners manage daily. Addressing these requires reframing conversations about masculinity and sexuality, promoting empathy and respect rather than dominance.

Understanding the current position of masculinity is not an academic exercise; it is a practical necessity. Many individuals in the criminal justice system internalise damaging ideals that equate masculinity with control, aggression and emotional suppression. These norms underpin behaviours linked to violence, domestic abuse and sexual harm. They also contribute to poor mental health and reluctance to seek help, increasing risk and complicating rehabilitation. By embedding a gender-informed approach, probation and youth justice practitioners can challenge harmful narratives without alienating, promote healthy masculine identities that emphasises empathy, accountability and emotional literacy, and address digital influences that perpetuate harmful norms. Tailoring interventions to cultural and social realities ensures relevance and effectiveness. This approach moves beyond punitive responses only, supporting long-term behaviour change and reducing recidivism. It also aligns with trauma-informed practice, recognising the interplay between identity, social norms and offending.

2.2 Understanding mental health outcomes

Mental health outcomes for young men and boys represent a critical challenge for probation and youth justice practitioners. Despite decades of progress in mental health awareness, male mental health remains disproportionately poor, with suicide continuing to be the leading cause of death for men under 45 in the UK (APPG, 2022). Data indicates that half of all mental health issues manifest by age 15, rising to 75 per cent by age 25 (Rice et al., 2018). These figures underscore an urgent need for gender-sensitive approaches within the criminal justice system.

The roots of this disparity lie in the social construction of masculinity. Masculinity is often framed as a precarious status, hard won and easily lost, requiring constant proof through behaviours such as emotional suppression, dominance and risk taking (Vandello and Bosson, 2013). This precarious position creates a cycle of stress and anxiety, where vulnerability is perceived as weakness and help seeking as a threat to masculine identity (Bosson et al., 2009) and in direct opposition to expected masculine norms (Wong et al., 2017). For boys and young men, especially during adolescence, these pressures intensify as identity formation collides with societal expectations of toughness and stoicism. This dynamic fosters shame and stigma, deterring boys from presenting as vulnerable and accessing services, leaving issues untreated until they escalate into aggression, substance misuse, or offending behaviour, patterns probation and youth justice practitioners frequently encounter. Adolescence (10–19 years) is a pivotal stage for male mental health. Hormonal changes, peer influence and social media amplify gender norms, while mental health literacy, the ability to recognise and act on mental health needs, remains low among boys (Jorm, 2012). Evidence shows that boys disengage from health services during this period and those who die by suicide are often unknown to support systems (Rodway et al., 2016). For practitioners, this means that early warning signs, such as aggression, withdrawal, or risk-taking, may mask underlying distress rather than deliberate defiance.

Additionally, mental health outcomes do not exist in isolation. They intersect with race, class, sexuality and neurodiversity, creating layered vulnerabilities. For example, boys from minority ethnic backgrounds may face compounded stigma around mental health, while LGBTQ+ boys

often experience discrimination and isolation (Schaub et al., 2024). Similarly, socio-economic disadvantage limits access to early intervention, increasing the likelihood of crisis driven engagement with the criminal justice system. Recognising these intersecting identities is essential for designing effective, equitable interventions.

For probation and youth justice practitioners, understanding the interplay between masculinity and mental health is crucial. Traditional punitive models risk exacerbating shame and reinforcing harmful norms. Instead, a reframed approach should prioritise:

Trauma-informed practice	Many behaviours linked to offending stem from unresolved trauma and identity conflicts – recognising this shifts the focus from punishment to rehabilitation
Gender-responsive interventions	Programmes should challenge harmful masculine norms while promoting emotional literacy and resilience; group-based interventions that normalise help seeking can reduce stigma
Intersectional awareness	Interventions must account for race, class and sexuality, avoiding one-size-fits-all models
Collaborative working	Early engagement with mental health professionals ensures integrated support, reducing the risk of escalation
Digital literacy	Online spaces often perpetuate misogynistic ideologies and unrealistic masculine ideals – equipping boys with critical thinking skills to navigate these environments is now a core safeguarding priority

Probation and youth justice practitioners can implement strengths-based approaches that highlight positive aspects of identity, such as creativity, leadership and empathy, rather than focusing solely on deficits. Creating psychologically safe spaces for dialogue is key. For example, structured group sessions that explore masculinity and mental health within the context of offending can foster openness and reduce shame. Digital interventions, such as app-based mental health tools, may also resonate with boys who are reluctant to engage in traditional settings (Rice et al., 2017).

2.3 Misogyny in the digital age

Extreme misogyny has become an increasingly visible and dangerous phenomenon, creating a cultural and psychological environment that intersects with poor mental health outcomes for young men and boys, and amplifies risks of violence against women and children. For probation and youth justice practitioners, understanding this dynamic is essential because it influences offending behaviour, identity formation and pathways into radicalisation. These ideologies do not exist in isolation; they are deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and damaging masculine ideals, which position men as dominant and women as subordinate (Connell, 2005). In contemporary society, these ideals are destabilised by social progress, such as women's increased autonomy and gender equality, leaving many boys and young men feeling disoriented and resentful. This sense of loss creates a vacuum that online influencers and extremist communities exploit, offering simplistic narratives that blame women for men's perceived decline in status (Sugiura, 2021).

Digital platforms have accelerated the spread of misogynistic content. Social media algorithms amplify influencers whose rhetoric glamorises wealth, dominance and control over women, presenting these as markers of masculine success (Haslop et al., 2024). Their popularity illustrates how algorithm driven content exploits the insecurities of young men and boys, drawing them into echo chambers that normalise misogyny and aggression. These influencers often appeal to men seeking certainty, reinforcing patriarchal ideals under the guise of restoring balance (Lawson, 2023).

For probation and youth justice practitioners, this digital dimension is critical; young men and boys under supervision may be consuming harmful content daily, shaping attitudes toward girls and women, relationships and violence. Without intervention, these narratives can escalate from online grievance to offline harm. Extreme misogyny is closely linked to poor mental health outcomes. Incel forums frequently feature discussions of depression, loneliness and suicidal ideation, yet these issues are reframed as women's fault rather than addressed through help-seeking (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2022). This externalisation of blame fosters resentment and legitimises violence as a means of reclaiming power. For some, misogynistic ideology becomes a coping mechanism for feelings of worthlessness, creating a dangerous pathway from psychological distress to extremist behaviour (Daly and Laskovtsov, 2021). Probation and youth justice practitioners often encounter young men and boys whose aggression, substance misuse, or offending masks underlying mental health struggles. Understanding the role of misogynistic narratives in these behaviours is essential for effective assessment and intervention.

The rise of extreme misogyny poses multiple challenges for the criminal justice system. Online radicalisation can translate into real world harm, including sexual violence and domestic abuse (Hoffman and Ware, 2020). Shame and stigma around vulnerability, coupled with misogynistic norms, deter boys and young men from accessing support, while identity conflicts make them resistant to interventions perceived as undermining their masculine status (Vandello and Bosson, 2013). Intersectionality (O'Neill, Nudd and Parmar, 2026) further complicates this picture; with race, class and sexuality intersecting with misogynistic ideologies, influencing how boys and young men experience marginalisation and seek belonging. For probation and youth justice practitioners, these dynamics demand a nuanced approach that addresses both attitudinal and emotional needs. Key components for effective delivery are as follows:

- effective practice begins with early identification – screening for misogynistic attitudes during assessments is vital, particularly among those with histories of violence or sexual harm
- digital awareness is equally important: incorporating questions about online activity and influencers into case management provides insight into risk factors that may otherwise remain hidden
- trauma-informed approaches should underpin all interventions, recognising that misogynistic beliefs often mask deeper vulnerabilities, including shame and identity crises (Patton et al., 2018)
- programmes must equip boys and young men with critical thinking skills to challenge harmful narratives and navigate online spaces safely
- digital literacy training is vital, helping boys understand how algorithms manipulate content and reinforcing critical appraisal skills (Solea and Sugiura, 2023)
- strengths-based approaches, highlighting creativity, leadership and resilience, can counterbalance the pull of harmful ideals
- collaboration with schools, youth services and mental health professionals ensures a joined-up response, addressing both attitudinal and emotional needs.

2.4 Violence: reframing masculinity for prevention and justice

Violence by men against women and children (VAWC), other men and themselves (i.e. suicide) remains one of the most pervasive and entrenched issues in contemporary society, deeply rooted in patriarchal power structures and cultural norms that equate masculinity with dominance, control and aggression (Walby, 1990; Connell, 2005). Despite decades of activism and legislative progress, gender-based violence continues at high rates, with women often facing a lifelong struggle for justice and systemic failures that re-traumatise victims through disbelief, minimisation and inadequate support (Home Office, 2021). For probation and youth justice practitioners, this is not only a women's issue; it is a societal crisis that demands a nuanced understanding of masculinity, early intervention and multi-level strategies to prevent harm.

Historically, violence against women has been normalised through cultural narratives and legal frameworks that positioned men as dominant and women as subordinate. Media portrayals compound this problem by framing male violence as individual pathology rather than a societal issue embedded in masculinity (Bouguettaya et al., 2020). Men remain statistically the primary perpetrators of violence against women, children, themselves and other men, yet the root causes – socialisation into damaging masculine norms and the cultural normalisation of aggression – are rarely addressed systemically (Kimmel, 2006). Boys and young men are socialised from an early age to equate strength with silence and power with control, reinforcing the normalisation of the 'violent man' archetype that underpins gender-based violence (Pleck, 1995). These norms not only harm women and children but also damage men themselves, creating cycles of shame, emotional suppression and poor mental health outcomes that can escalate into offending behaviour (Bosson et al., 2009; Vandello and Bosson, 2013).

For probation and youth justice practitioners, recognising these dynamics is critical. Many young men and boys under supervision have been shaped by environments where aggression is rewarded and vulnerability is punished. Without intervention, these patterns persist, increasing the risk of domestic abuse, sexual violence and other forms of harm. Early intervention with boys and young men is therefore essential, not only to prevent violence but to disrupt the gendered scripts that perpetuate it. This requires reframing masculinity to reject violence and promote empathy, emotional literacy and healthy relationships (Flood, 2011). A blame-based approach is counterproductive. Positioning boys and young men as problems to fix rather than partners in change fosters resentment and disengagement, potentially pushing them toward harmful ideologies. Instead, criminal justice professionals must adopt empathetic, pragmatic strategies that hold individuals accountable without negating their capacity for growth. This includes participatory interventions that centre boys' and young men's voices and lived experiences, enabling them to co-design solutions that resonate with their realities (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995).

Practical steps for probation and youth justice practice include integrating gender-sensitive assessments that explore attitudes toward violence, alongside trauma-informed approaches that address underlying shame and identity conflicts. A systemic culture shift is also required. Education, policy and justice systems must move beyond reactive, punitive responses toward proactive strategies that tackle the root causes of violence. This includes embedding discussions of masculinity and respect within community programmes and probation/youth justice services, alongside robust training for professionals on gender dynamics and digital influences. Without such measures, efforts to reduce male violence in all its forms will remain fragmented and ineffective. Ultimately, violence by men is not inevitable. It is a behaviour shaped and reinforced by social norms, which can be examined and challenged. For probation

and youth justice practitioners, the challenge is to create spaces where boys and young men can explore alternative masculinities that value empathy over dominance and collaboration over control. By reframing masculinity and engaging boys and young men as allies in prevention, cycles of harm and violence can be disrupted.

2.5 Relationships and sex education: building foundations for healthy masculinity

Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) plays a vital role in shaping young people's understanding of identity, consent and emotional wellbeing. Its role as a key aspect of primary prevention is often overlooked, despite RSHE being one of the most effective ways to address harmful behaviours before they emerge. Historically, RSHE has focused narrowly on risk and prevention, such as avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, while neglecting emotional development and the lived realities of young people (Sex Education Forum, 2017). This omission has significant implications for the criminal justice system because gaps in RSHE contribute to harmful behaviours, gender-based violence and poor mental health outcomes, all of which intersect with offending patterns among young men and boys.

Young people frequently report that RSHE feels outdated, heteronormative and disconnected from their experiences (King-Hill et al., 2023). Boys and young men, in particular, often feel excluded or stereotyped within RSHE content, portrayed either as potential aggressors or emotionally disengaged. This framing reinforces damaging gender norms and leaves boys and young men without safe spaces to explore complex issues such as consent, sexuality and emotional regulation. For probation and youth justice practitioners, understanding these dynamics is crucial because many young men and boys under supervision have grown up in environments where conversations about relationships and sex were either absent or framed through shame and silence. These gaps can manifest in harmful sexual behaviours, aggression and distorted views of gender roles, issues that practitioners frequently encounter.

Despite recent progress, RSHE remains a contested space, influenced by political, cultural and religious ideologies that often restrict open dialogue. One of the most pressing issues is the role of shame. Boys and young men consistently report feeling embarrassed when discussing sex and relationships, which inhibits their ability to ask questions or seek guidance. This silence is compounded by societal expectations that frame boys and young men as always willing to engage in sexual activity, leaving no space for them to refuse or express vulnerability (King-Hill, 2025a). Such norms not only perpetuate harmful behaviours but also create barriers to mental health support and healthy relationship development.

For probation and youth justice practitioners, recognising the link between these early socialisations and later offending is essential. Harmful sexual behaviours, for example, often stem from misinformation, lack of guidance and the internalisation of hegemonic masculine ideals (Flood, 2011). With formal education often failing to address young men and boys' needs, many may access pornography and social media for information about sex and relationships (King-Hill, 2025a). These sources frequently reinforce misogynistic narratives and unrealistic expectations, contributing to the normalisation of coercion and violence. For criminal justice professionals, this underscores the importance of addressing digital influences during supervision and intervention planning. Conversations about online behaviour, pornography and consent should form part of rehabilitative work, helping young men and boys critically appraise harmful content and develop healthier attitudes.

Trust is a recurring theme. Boys often fear judgment or repercussions when discussing sensitive issues, which mirrors the challenges probation and youth justice practitioners face when encouraging openness about offending behaviour. Building trust through clear

boundaries, confidentiality and non-judgmental dialogue is essential both in RSHE and in criminal justice contexts. By adopting participatory methods and strengths-based approaches, practitioners can help boys develop critical thinking skills, challenge harmful norms and build resilience, reducing the risk of reoffending and promoting positive identity development.

2.6 Why excluding young men and boys from the conversation is damaging

Young men and boys are frequently excluded from discussions about violence, gender and prevention and this omission has significant consequences for safeguarding, rehabilitation and cultural change. When public discourse and policy frameworks focus exclusively on violence against women and girls (VAWG) rather than violence against women and children (VAWC), they risk erasing the experiences of boys and young men as victims and overlooking their potential role as partners in creating solutions. This does not diminish the importance of recognising and addressing violence against women and girls; rather, it highlights the need for nuanced understanding of when the term VAWG is appropriate and when broader, inclusive language should be used such as VAWC (King-Hill, 2025b) This narrow framing reinforces harmful stereotypes that position young men and boys solely as potential offenders rather than individuals navigating complex identities shaped by societal expectations of masculinity. The result is a deficit-based narrative that fosters shame, resentment and defensiveness, conditions that can push young men and boys toward harmful ideologies and increase the risk of offending. The impact of exclusion is twofold:

1. It silences young men and boy's voices in conversations about gender and violence, leaving them disconnected from initiatives designed to tackle these issues. Many young men report feeling judged and unheard, which creates a vacuum where grievance and hopelessness thrive. This sense of marginalisation can make boys and young men more susceptible to radicalisation in online spaces, where misogynistic influencers and extremist communities exploit feelings of isolation and resentment.

2. Exclusion from safeguarding frameworks has practical implications, with boys overlooked within service delivery. This gap perpetuates cycles of harm, as boys who experience violence without intervention are more likely to internalise damaging norms and replicate harmful behaviours later in life. Ignoring boys' experiences also undermines efforts to address child-on-child harm, which is a growing concern in schools and communities.

Including young men and boys in these conversations is not about diminishing the focus on gendered violence; it is about expanding protection and fostering cultural change. Engagement must move beyond blame-based approaches, which shut down dialogue and create resistance, toward collaborative strategies that position boys and young men as allies in prevention. Creating safe spaces for young men and boys to explore identity, challenge harmful norms and develop empathy is essential for reducing violence and promoting equality. This involves reframing masculinity as a positive, inclusive concept and recognising that boys and young men have a stake in building safer communities.

3. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper demonstrates how masculinity matters for probation and youth justice practice. It shapes how boys and young men perceive themselves, how they interact with others, and how they respond to authority and intervention. When masculinity is framed through rigid norms of dominance, control and emotional suppression, it becomes a driver of harmful behaviours, from violence and coercive control to harmful sexual behaviour and resistance to rehabilitation. These behaviours are not inevitable; they are learned, reinforced by social norms and sustained by cultural narratives that can be challenged and changed.

For probation and youth justice practitioners, this means moving beyond surface-level interventions to address the structural and cultural drivers of offending. Gender-informed practice is not about excusing behaviour; it is about understanding its roots and designing responses that promote accountability while fostering growth. This requires integrating trauma-informed approaches that recognise the interplay between identity, shame and offending, giving boys and young men a voice in shaping solutions. When they are engaged as partners in change rather than positioned as problems to fix, interventions become more effective and sustainable. The digital dimension adds urgency to this work. Misogynistic ideologies and harmful masculine ideals proliferate online, creating echo chambers that normalise aggression and undermine respect for women and girls, and social frameworks and boundaries. These influences cannot be ignored in probation and youth justice settings. Risk assessments must include questions about online behaviour and interventions should incorporate digital literacy and critical thinking skills to help boys and young men navigate these spaces safely. By equipping them to challenge harmful narratives, practitioners can reduce the risk of radicalisation and gender-based violence.

Mental health remains another pressing concern. Boys and young men in the justice system often experience profound psychological distress, yet stigma and gender norms deter them from seeking help. This silence is not benign; it fuels cycles of aggression, substance misuse and reoffending. Probation and youth justice practice must therefore prioritise mental health literacy, creating environments where vulnerability is normalised and support is accessible. Strengths-based approaches that highlight resilience, creativity and empathy can counterbalance the pressures of precarious masculinity and promote positive identity development.

In conclusion, addressing masculinity within probation and youth justice practice is not optional; it is essential. By embedding gender-informed, culturally competent and trauma-sensitive approaches, criminal justice professionals can disrupt cycles of harm and support young men and boys in building identities rooted in empathy, respect and accountability.

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