



Lifting barriers

Boys' disengagement from education

Volume 1: Scoping study

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SHORT SUMMARY

The potential of addressing harmful and restrictive gender norms to support boys' continued learning

Efforts to achieve inclusive and quality education for all have prioritised girls' education, with policies and programmes helping to reduce gender gaps that have historically disadvantaged girls. However, gender gaps that disadvantage boys, such as lower rates of completion of a full cycle of education in some contexts, have not always been adequately addressed in policy or practice.

Gender norms and stereotypes significantly shape the educational experiences and outcomes of both boys and girls. This scoping study explores how educational innovations can challenge gender norms, including harmful and restrictive masculinities, to improve boys' engagement in school while advancing gender equality more broadly. The study draws on insights from six programmes and pilot interventions across diverse country contexts.

This scoping work is part of a wider three-year project, 'Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality', under the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) programme. The project includes the development and piloting of a school-based intervention model with a focus on masculinities, working closely with research partners and Ministries of Education in Cambodia, Lesotho and Malawi.



Keeping boys engaged in education requires holistic approaches building on boys' strengths



unesco

"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"



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Acronyms

CAVWOC	Centre for Alternatives for Victimized Women and Children
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
CPD	Continuing professional development
CSR	Centre for Social Research (University of Malawi)
CwR	Connect with Respect
DfE	Department for Education
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
GEMS	Gender Equity Movement in Schools
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICRW	International Centre for Research on Women
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
KAP	Knowledge, attitude and practice
KII	Key informant interview
KIX	Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
LSEP	Life Skills for Equality Project
MAVA	Men Against Violence and Abuse
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PATH	Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UEA	University of East Anglia
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VYA 2.0	Very Young Adolescence 2.0

Key concepts

Boys' disengagement from education is understood as a gendered phenomenon partly rooted in societal norms and concepts of masculinity, which can lead boys and young men to consciously or unconsciously to withdraw from education. Additional social, economic and cultural factors, in families, communities and schools, may also lead to boys' low engagement with education and contribute to school leaving/dropout. Disengagement from education can manifest in different forms such as lack of interest, poor participation, absenteeism, neglecting homework or exam preparation and ultimately, dropping out (UNESCO, 2022b).

Drop-out or school leaving refers to leaving school before the completion of a given stage of education or leaving at some intermediate or non-terminal point in a cycle of schooling. It can be temporary or definitive and can be the result of an active decision made by the learner or the result of push and/or pull factors (based on UNESCO-IIEP, n.d.)

Gender equality in education means that the right to education of all learners is respected equally regardless of gender. Learners of all genders are given equal access to learning opportunities, resources and protections, and learners of all genders benefit from and are treated in education equally (based on UNESCO, 2019a).

Gender equality through education refers to education's key role in addressing the wider issue of gender equality. Educational institutions can promote equitable attitudes, changing the way people think about traditional gender roles and helping to build long-term sustainable change. And achieving equal outcomes for female, male and non-binary learners can help to empower all people to create better lives (UNESCO, 2019a).

Gender norms are understood as ideas about how men and women should behave: the expectations and standards that are set for each gender in different societies, cultures and communities. They are both context- and time-specific. People internalize these 'rules' at an early age, in the beginning of a cycle of gender socialization and stereotyping that continues for the rest of their lives. Gender norms thus not only become individuals' expectations of others, but also of themselves. Gender norms can be harmful, such as those that limit individuals' behaviours, opportunities, aspirations or relationships based on their gender, or that reinforce unequal power relations between genders (see also 'harmful and restrictive masculinities'). They can also be positive, when they promote equity, inclusion and shared power, for example, by encouraging people of all genders to pursue a full range of roles, express themselves freely, and share responsibilities (see also 'positive and healthy masculinities'). The socialization process happening within educational institutions often replicates that of broader society and can contribute to the reproduction of social and gender norms (Marcus et al. 2024; UNICEF et al., 2019; Cookson et al., 2023; Stromquist, 2007).

Gender-responsive means that strategies include evidence-based gender analysis which identifies and acknowledges existing gender differences, needs and inequalities. Activities at this level include specific policies and actions that address inequalities. Gender-responsive strategies, such as training in gender-responsive pedagogy, can be used as part of a system-wide, gender-transformative approach to education.

A **gender-transformative approach** entails addressing the underlying causes of gender inequalities. It includes implementing policies and initiatives which not only address the different needs, aspirations, capacities and contributions of girls, boys, women, men and non-binary people, but also challenge existing and discriminatory policies and practices, creating radical change. A **gender-transformative approach to education** is one that encompasses policy, programming and interventions to create opportunities to actively challenge gender norms and wider inequalities. This includes promoting gender equality through curricular and teaching reforms (UNESCO, 2022b).

Harmful and restrictive masculinities are linked to hegemonic gender norms which suggest that boys and men should conform to a 'right' or 'ideal' way to be a man or a boy. This 'ideal' places pressure on boys and men to conform to certain expectations, which often include being self-sufficient, acting tough and using aggression to solve conflict. It is constructed in opposition to femininities and/or marginalized masculinities. Such ideas and practices of masculinity are harmful to girls, women and non-binary people as they uphold men's privilege over women and non-binary people. They are also harmful to boys and men, who are regulated by rigid expectations of manhood that restrict their freedom to express emotions, seek help, or deviate from dominant masculine norms. Harmful and restrictive masculinities can undermine boys' motivation and learning, because they often position academic effort and aspiration as incompatible with being a 'real' boy or man, affecting boys' motivation to learn (Heilman et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2022b; UNESCO-IBE, 2025; WHO, 2019).

Intersectionality refers to the way in which different aspects of a person's identity, such as gender, age, disability, ethnicity, geography, socioeconomic status, displacement and sexual orientation and gender identity and expression interact to shape their experiences and access to power, opportunities, and rights. It recognizes that people can face multiple, overlapping and compounding forms of discrimination and marginalization. Notions of masculinity interact with the above characteristics in complex and reinforcing ways (Crenshaw, 2017; Marcus et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2020a; UN Women and UNPRPD, 2022).

Masculinities or men's identities are socially constructed, produced and reproduced. Masculinities can refer to identities, social norms and power dynamics. Examples of hegemonic masculinity can include being a 'provider' or 'protector' (identities), being aggressive or not showing emotion (social norms) or the subordination of women and girls and men who do not conform to dominant gender norms (power dynamics). Yet, masculinities are plural and at times contradictory, they are variable and can change across time and space, within societies and through life. Often, we come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of 'others' – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women (Connell, 2000; UNESCO, 2022b; Ragonese et al., 2019).

Positive and healthy masculinities (also referred to as positive and inclusive masculinities in the literature) emphasize the constructive aspects of masculine identities. They serve as a counterpoint to harmful and restrictive gender norms that portray men and boys as potential perpetrators or aggressors and focus solely on the harm they cause to themselves and others. It emphasizes that all boys and men should be free to express diverse expressions of positive masculinities without fear of exclusion, ridicule or violence. Positive and healthy masculinities refer to alternative expressions of 'hegemonic masculinity' (see above) that align with egalitarian values and promote health and well-being. Examples include committed fatherhood and partnership, caring and intimacy, and help-seeking behaviour. The use of the plural term 'masculinities' underscores that there are many positive ways to be a boy or man. It also recognizes that masculine (and feminine) gender norms differ across cultures and contexts and change over time. Promoting positive and healthy masculinities is central in efforts to shift gender norms that harm boys and men and the people around them (based on UNESCO-IBE, 2025; UN Women-Training Centre, 2016).

Scaling includes many activities that are focused on deepening or expanding an impact of an intervention, programme, or policy. Scaling can be horizontal, vertical or compound. Horizontal scaling refers to a scaling pathway focused on increasing the breadth of coverage of an intervention, expanding from one geographic area to another or to additional beneficiaries. Also called scaling out, replication, or diffusion. Vertical scaling refers to a scaling pathway focused on integrating key aspects of an initiative into broader government systems at national or subnational levels and mainstreaming delivery into normal operations. Also called scaling up or mainstreaming. Compound scaling refers to a scaling pathway focused on diversifying and expanding the types of activities or areas of engagement undertaken in an innovation or by an organization. Also called grafting or functional scaling (Brookings, 2024).

Executive summary

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development makes the promise to leave no one behind. While improving educational opportunities for girls globally continues to be of paramount importance to achieving gender equality in and through education, this focus on achieving gender parity and equality must not ignore boys. Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all – Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 – and achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls – SDG 5 – requires gender-transformative action.

This involves addressing the underlying causes of gender inequalities. It includes policies and initiatives that not only respond to the different needs, aspirations, capacities and contributions of girls, boys, women, men and non-binary people, but also challenge discriminatory policies and practices, creating radical change. A gender-transformative approach to education encompasses policy, programming and interventions to actively challenge gender norms and wider inequalities, including promoting gender equality through curricular and teaching reforms.

Education is a fundamental human right. Realizing this right requires addressing boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education. Efforts to achieve inclusive and quality education for all have focused on girls' education, helping to reduce gender gaps that have historically disadvantaged girls. However, in contexts where boys are less likely to enrol and complete a full cycle of education, disparities affecting boys must also be addressed. High-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have implemented measures since the early 2000s to tackle boys' disengagement from education, yet global political momentum remains limited. Despite evidence of poor learning outcomes and disengagement among boys, including more recently in low- and middle-income countries, few targeted policies or programmes exist, and rigorous evaluations of such interventions are scarce.

Gender norms and stereotypes significantly impact boys' and girls' educational experiences and outcomes. Societal expectations around masculinity often discourage boys from engaging fully in school, exposing them to negative behaviours and limiting their academic self-perception. These norms intersect with poverty and economic pressures, further pushing boys out of school. Addressing these harmful gender norms could support boys' continued learning and foster better attitudes about gender equality.

Research on how educational programmes can challenge gender norms, including harmful and restrictive masculinities, to improve boys' engagement in school and support gender equality is limited. This scoping study seeks to fill this gap, drawing on insights from selected programmes, innovations and pilot interventions across diverse countries.¹

Specifically, this scoping study has the following objectives:

- Identify and analyse the key strategies and components of evidence-informed or promising programmes that help keep boys engaged in school and learning.
- Understand the extent to which these programmes address harmful and restrictive masculinities, while promoting gender-equitable attitudes, values and behaviours.
- Explore factors that enable, incentivize or impede the scaling of such programmes in the education sector.

The study takes a qualitative approach, designed to highlight the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders involved in implementing or overseeing the selected programmes. Primary data were collected through in-depth key informant interviews (KIIs), stakeholder workshops, and focus group discussions (FGDs). These data were combined with a mapping of programme documentation to support the triangulation of findings and provide a comprehensive review of the strategies, core components, enabling factors, and challenges of the selected programmes, as well as participants' perspectives on their successes and potential for scalability.

¹ Henceforth, referred to as 'programmes' for consistency.

Six programmes were purposively preselected for this study:

- Cambodia – Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP)
- India – Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS)
- Malawi – Very Young Adolescence 2.0 (VYA 2.0)
- Portugal – Happy Schools
- The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – Lifting Limits
- Zambia – Connect with Respect (CWR)

This study is part of the three-year *Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality* project led by UNESCO and implemented in partnership with the University of East Anglia and Equipundo under the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) programme. The project includes the development and piloting of a school-based intervention model with a focus on masculinities, in close collaboration with research partners and Ministries of Education in Cambodia, Lesotho and Malawi to assess capacity and scaling needs.

Key findings

- **Socioeconomic pressures, social and gender norms, and systemic issues contribute to boys' disengagement from education**

The study found that boys' disengagement from education stems from a combination of socioeconomic pressures, social and gender norms, and systemic issues. Contributing factors include financial responsibilities, peer influences, harsh learning environments, rigid teaching methods, and a lack of safe spaces or support in schools. Societal expectations around masculinity further compound these challenges. Gender equality initiatives often fail to meaningfully engage boys, reinforcing the perception that such efforts are irrelevant to them.

- **Addressing boys' disengagement from education requires political will and holistic approaches**

Effective strategies to address these challenges include whole-school, gender-transformative approaches that use participatory methods, safe spaces, flexible programme design, trained facilitators and strong community involvement. Successful implementation relies on partnerships, policy alignment, leadership support, and responsiveness to feedback, while barriers such as funding, resistance, and cultural norms persist. Some interventions demonstrate promising and sustained impact, but scaling up remains difficult without institutional backing. Key recommendations include policy engagement, awareness training for educators, open dialogue with funders, facilitator support, parental involvement, and peer-to-peer structures to ensure sustainability and impact.

This volume is part of a series of publications produced within the GPE-KIX *Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality* project, along with the Cambodia case study (volume 2) and the Malawi case study (volume 3).

1. Introduction



Background

Achieving gender equality in and through education is essential to meeting the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Target 4.7 emphasizes education's role in fostering gender equality, which includes challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes, and mainstreaming gender equality into curricula, teacher education and student assessment (UNGEI and UNESCO, 2018). While improving educational opportunities for girls remains a global priority, ensuring that boys remain engaged is equally important for achieving education for all, and fostering gender-equitable societies. When boys learn in environments that promote gender equality, they can support advancing social justice (Monkman and Hoffman, 2013).

UNESCO's global report on boys' disengagement from education highlights widening disparities in boys' academic performance and attainment (UNESCO, 2022b). While these trends were previously observed mainly in high- and upper-middle-income countries, especially in Western Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, they are now emerging in low- and lower-middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2018, 2022b). In some settings, traditional gaps that once disadvantaged girls are closing or reversing, with fewer boys completing full cycles of basic education (UNESCO, 2022b).

Currently, 272 million children of primary and secondary school age are out of school, including 139 million boys and 133 million girls. While Asia shows progress in reducing the number of out-of-school children, the number is rising in sub-Saharan Africa (Dharamshi et al., 2022; UIS and GEMR team, 2025). Analysis from 2019 shows boys were more likely to repeat primary grades in 130 countries and less likely to complete upper secondary education in 73 countries. Gender disparities persist at the tertiary level, with only 88 men enrolled for every 100 women (UNESCO, 2022b, 2024a; UIS and GEMR team, 2025).

Boys' disengagement is shaped by a complex interplay of individual, economic, social and institutional factors. Societal expectations and gender norms profoundly affect students' school experiences, academic outcomes and educational trajectories (de Carvalho, 2025; Marcus et al. 2024). Masculine norms – such as those discouraging vulnerability, help-seeking or academic ambition – can diminish boys' motivation to learn, particularly during adolescence (de Carvalho, 2025; UNESCO, 2022b). Educational institutions may unintentionally reinforce disengagement when boys perceive education

as disconnected from their realities or dominant masculinities (Skipper and Fox, 2022), and teacher expectations can further affect learning and career pathways (Johnston et al., 2019). Unsafe schools, corporal punishment (UNESCO and UNGEI, 2015), poverty and the need to work further drive boys out of school.

These gendered dynamics are reinforced early in childhood through media, play and classroom interactions, shaping children's self-perceptions and future aspirations (Spangsdorf et al., 2023). They operate both through the formal curriculum and the 'hidden curriculum' of values, behaviours and attitudes transmitted by educators, school leadership and peers (Marcus et al., 2024).

Despite growing evidence across national contexts showing that boys face higher risks than girls of grade repetition, poor academic performance, and failing to complete their schooling – especially among the poorest populations (UNESCO, 2018; UNESCO, 2022b; de Carvalho, 2025) – research on effective strategies to tackle boys' disengagement from education remains limited. Gender norms and stereotypes significantly shape the educational experiences and outcomes of both boys and girls, reinforcing wider societal inequalities (UNESCO, 2022b; Marcus et al., 2024). Research on programmes to address gender norms to improve education is particularly scarce.

Policies and programmes to expand girls' access to education have been widely developed and documented and have yielded significant gains (Tetra Tech International Development, 2024, 2025; Unterhalter, 2014). However, fewer regional and national initiatives have addressed boys' disengagement and dropout, and international programmes are even more limited. While some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and high-income regions have introduced measures since the early 2000s (Jha et al, 2012; Cobbet and Younger, 2012), global political momentum remains limited.

Realizing the right to education requires addressing boys' disengagement from education. Addressing boys' disengagement not only benefits their learning, employment opportunities, income and well-being, but also broader gender equality and economic, social and health outcomes. The private, fiscal and social costs of boys' disengagement from education are enormous, underlining the need for inclusive educational approaches (UNESCO, 2022b; UNESCO et al., 2024).

Supporting boys' engagement in education should complement, not hinder girls' progress, particularly as evidence suggests declining support for gender equality among boys and young men (Betts Razavi, 2024) and increased resistance to gender-responsive education programming (D'Angelo et al., 2024).

UNESCO has found that few low- or middle-income countries have specific policies targeting boys' enrolment and completion of basic education, even in countries where boys are clearly disadvantaged, and rigorous evidence on effective interventions is limited (UNESCO, 2022b). A recent ALIGN review highlighted

significant gaps in promoting gender-equitable masculinities in schools, including teacher training, curriculum integration, and the identification of key enabling factors (Marcus et al., 2024).

This scoping study, part of the *Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality* project, draws on insights from implementing organizations and practitioners to address these gaps. It examines how harmful and restrictive gender norms affect boys' educational engagement and identifies strategies to support boys' academic achievement, while fostering their development as gender-equitable individuals.

Project background

The three-year *Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality* project seeks to investigate the influence of harmful masculine gender norms on boys' educational motivation and desire to learn. Through a combination of research and practice, the project aims to identify the conditions that enable the development, effective implementation, and scaling of strategies that promote positive masculinities, keep boys engaged in school, and advance gender equality in and through education.

The research component began with an initial scoping study to identify good and promising practices, which are presented with this report. This was followed by in-depth case studies in schools and communities in

Cambodia and Malawi to explore the factors contributing to boys' disengagement and how these can be addressed (UNESCO, Equipundo and UEA, 2026a, 2026b).

Insights from this research will inform the design and contextualization of a pilot school-based intervention model in primary schools in Malawi. If successful, this pilot will serve as a foundation for future interventions in Cambodia and Lesotho.

The project is jointly implemented by a consortium consisting of UNESCO, Equipundo and the University of East Anglia (UEA), in close collaboration with national research partners, curriculum developers and policymakers in the three target countries.

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this scoping study is to investigate and identify key elements – strategies and components – within educational programmes that can be leveraged to address harmful gender norms, engage boys in schools, and promote gender-equitable attitudes, values and behaviours.

The specific objectives of the scoping study are to:

1. Identify and analyse key strategies and components (or elements) of evidence-informed, promising programmes that support boys to be engaged in school and learning.
2. Examine the extent to which these selected programmes address gender norms, particularly harmful and restrictive masculinities, while promoting gender-equitable attitudes, values and behaviours.
3. Explore the factors that enable, incentivize or impede the scaling of such programmes in the education sector.

Methodology

The methodology for this scoping study was designed to assess how and in what ways selected programmes have addressed harmful and restrictive gender norms, supported boys' continued engagement in school, and contributed to the development of more inclusive and positive masculinities. It also sought to identify key enablers and barriers to implementation, as well as opportunities for improving and scaling promising programmes.

This scoping study is guided by four key research questions (**Box 1**), aimed at deepening understanding

of the underlying factors driving boys' disengagement, unpacking the design and implementation of selected programmes, assessing the extent to which they contribute to positive outcomes for boys, and identifying key lessons and considerations for future scalability. In order to address research gaps, this scoping study has placed emphasis on the role of gender norms in educational engagement and disengagement.

Data collection took place between July and September 2024.

Box 1. Research questions

- What key factors influence boys' disengagement from education?
- What are the key approaches and components of selected programmes that show potential for keeping boys engaged in school and learning, and promoting gender equality in and through education? What factors enable or impede implementation?
- To what extent can elements that address gender norms and expectations, including restrictive and harmful masculinities, keep boys engaged in school and learning, and promote gender-equitable attitudes, values and behaviours? How is such impact measured?
- What factors enable, incentivize or impede the scaling of such innovation in the education sector?

Source: Authors.

A qualitative research approach was adopted to foreground the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders involved in the implementation or oversight of the selected programmes. Primary data were collected through in-depth key informant interviews (KIIs), stakeholder workshops, and focus group discussions (FGDs). These data were complemented by a structured mapping of programme documentation (**Chapter 3**), enabling triangulation of findings and the development of a comprehensive understanding of the strategies, core components, enabling factors and challenges of the selected programmes, along with participants' perceptions of the success of the programme and the potential for scaling.

The data were analysed to produce (a) a cross-case analysis highlighting key findings (**Chapters 4, 5 and 6**) and (b) in-depth individual mini 'case studies' of the context and key attributes of selected programmes.

In addition to the data collection and analysis, this report contains an overview of literature from relevant fields of study to inform the research. Sources of academic and practitioner evidence were identified using key words and terms such as education and school (dis)engagement, dropout, absenteeism, boys' education. Social science and education databases were used in the literature search, with criteria including date of publication, inclusion of Global south contexts, and journal reputation. All literature used was in English – a limitation of the review.

Data collection methods

Data were collected through four methods: a desk review, KIs, FGDs and stakeholder workshops.

Desk-based document review: A protocol and checklist of key information was used to find and review existing literature, programme documents and evaluations. This provided a contextual understanding of the aims, key components, progress and outcomes of the selected programmes.

KIs: Interviews were conducted in person, online or by phone, using semi-structured interview guides aligned with the study's research questions, but flexible enough to encourage broader discussion. Three interview guides were developed for (1) international programme staff, (2) implementing staff and researchers, and (3) educators. The guides were prepared in English and translated into Khmer, Hindi, Chichewa and Portuguese for interviews in Cambodia, India, Malawi and Portugal. The KIs were conducted in the language preferred by the interviewee, with interviewers fluent in both English and the respective national languages. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

FGDs: In Cambodia, FGDs were conducted by the national research partner, during their fieldwork. Two groups of students (1 group with 4 boys, 1 group with 2 boys and 2 girls) participated in 2 FGDs of about 45 minutes each, conducted in Khmer. These discussions informed general background and the Cambodia mini-case study, but the data is not drawn on directly for this report.

Stakeholder workshops: Half-day workshops were held in Malawi and the United Kingdom with a variety of experts and key stakeholders to explore the context and challenges of boys' disengagement, programme successes and challenges, and issues related to scalability. Employing participatory research and evaluation techniques, the workshops combined presentations by programme staff with participatory activities to foster dialogue and build capacity.

In the United Kingdom, a **World Café methodology** was employed to facilitate small group discussions around focused questions, encouraging participants to share their ideas and reflections openly (Löhr et al., 2020). To enhance engagement and creativity, washable tablecloths and markers were used to capture responses. In Malawi, participants also heard directly from youth affected by disengagement from education and shared their experiences and suggestions through group work.²



Sampling and study participants

Six programmes were purposively preselected by UNESCO for this scoping study, based on programmes selected in *Leave no child behind: Global report on boys' disengagement from education* (UNESCO, 2022b).

This selection included a mix of more established programmes (some of which have been scaled across multiple countries) and smaller interventions and pilot programmes. The countries chosen for this study – Cambodia, India, Malawi, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Zambia – reflect diverse contexts where boys' disengagement has been identified as concerning.

The selected cases are:

- Cambodia – Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP)
- India – Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS)
- Malawi – Very Young Adolescence 2.0 (VYA 2.0)
- Portugal – Happy Schools
- United Kingdom³ – Lifting Limits
- Zambia – Connect with Respect (CwR)

² Workshop reports offer a more detailed descriptions of the methods employed and workshop outcomes, available at the GPE-KIX webpage [Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality](#).

³ In the United Kingdom, the scope of the research was extended to encompass insights from similar programmes and applied research (Being a Boy, Boys' Impact, Gender Action and Taking Boys Seriously).

Several considerations informed the selection of the cases for this scoping study:

- **Relevance:** The potential to inform the development of a gender-transformative model to address boys' disengagement.
- **A focus on gender norms and well-being:** A focus on addressing harmful gender norms (e.g., GEMS) and stereotypes (e.g., Lifting Limits) and/or promoting child-centred skills development and well-being (e.g., Happy Schools).
- **Identified as a promising practice:** Identified as a promising practice in the UNESCO 2022 *Global report on boys' disengagement*.
- **Alignment with consortium activities:** Known to or being implemented by partners in target countries of the broader GPE-KIX project consortium (e.g., Cambodia and Malawi).

- **Established networks:** Existing professional networks and country presence of the consortium.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify and recruit participants. This non-random sampling was employed to ensure an 'information-rich' sample for learning (Patton, 2002) and to inform the research questions, rather than to represent broader demographic trends in a specific population.

Leveraging the project team's networks and in-country gatekeepers, individuals familiar with and meaningfully engaged with the selected programmes were invited for key informant interviews, focus group discussions (Cambodia) and half-day stakeholder workshops (Malawi and the United Kingdom).

A total of 83 study participants (42 female, 41 male), also referred to in this study as interviewees, participated in the research (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Scoping study programmes, participants and data collection

Country	Programme and implementing organization	Participants	Data collection
Cambodia	The Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP) – Room to Read	KIIs: 6 LSEP staff & facilitators, 1 educator, 2 school leaders, 3 parents, 1 government representative (5 female, 8 male) FGDs: 8 students (6 male, 2 female)	Face-to-face interviews and FGDs
India	The Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) programme – International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)	KIIs: 5 ICRW (incl. 1 programme director and 4 programme coordinators) (2 female, 3 male)	Online only
Malawi	Equipundo's The Very Young Adolescence 2.0 (VYA 2.0) programme – Centre for Alternatives for Victimized Women and Children (CAVWOC)	KIIs: 2 CAVWOC staff, 7 implementers (facilitators), 3 educators (5 female, 6 male) Workshop: 5 implementing staff, 1 facilitator, 1 civil society, 3 government representatives, 1 youth (6 female, 6 male)	Online interviews and workshop activities
Portugal	UNESCO's 'Happy Schools' Initiative – Universidade Aberta, and the Ministry of Education	KIIs: 3 UNESCO staff, 3 implementing institutions, 1 educator (5 female, 2 male)	Online interviews
United Kingdom	Lifting Limits and various programmes (Being a Boy, Boys' Impact, Gender Action, Taking Boys Seriously)	KIIs: 2 researchers, 5 implementing NGOs, 1 educator (5 female, 3 male) Workshop: 7 implementing NGOs, 2 researchers, 1 government, 1 educators union (7 female, 4 male)	Online interviews and workshop activities
Zambia	UNESCO's Connect with Respect (CwR) programme	KIIs: 2 UNESCO staff, 4 implementers, 2 educators (5 female, 3 male)	Online and phone call interviews

Source: Authors.

Data management and analysis

Data management: All KIs and FGDs were recorded with the participants' consent. Online interviews conducted via Teams or Zoom generated automatic transcripts, which were carefully reviewed and cross-checked against the recorded interviews to ensure accuracy. Other interviews and FGDs were transcribed manually from audio recordings. All transcripts were anonymized, linked to participants by unique ID numbers, and translated where required. Notes taken by rapporteurs during stakeholder workshops were written up as workshop reports. Interview and FGD transcripts, along with workshop notes and creative outputs were stored in a password-protected shared folder accessible only to research team members. These materials were then subjected to qualitative analysis using NVivo software and manual coding.

Coding: To facilitate the qualitative analysis, interview transcripts were coded using an *a priori* coding frame, based on thematic sections of the interview guides and refined according to information emerging from close reading of the transcripts. Coding allows researchers to reduce large amounts of qualitative data present in

transcripts to manageable units for analysis (Cohen et al., 2017). Summary descriptions of coded data, arranged by theme and participant, were uploaded onto a shared spreadsheet accessible to all researchers.

Thematic analysis: The coded data were analysed thematically to respond to research questions. The coding frame facilitated two levels of thematic analysis: (1) systematic, cross-case analysis across programmes and countries, focusing on key themes such as factors contributing to boys' disengagement, the perceived effectiveness of gender-responsive programming, core programme components, enabling factors, success and challenges, and scalability; and (2) in-depth country-based or intervention-based analysis of established and emerging themes. Illustrative direct quotes were extracted and included in the shared spreadsheet to support the interpretation of findings. The coding frame supported the triangulation and synthesis of primary and secondary quantitative data, enabling consistent thematic framework across data sources.

Ethics requirements

Ethical approval: Ethical approval for the scoping study was granted by the University of East Anglia's Research Ethics Committee housed in the School of Global Development. Additional ethics approval for primary data collection in Malawi was provided by the University of Malawi's Research Ethics Committee. Endorsement and permission to conduct research in Cambodia were obtained from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport prior to data collection.

All participants were fully informed about the research aims, objectives and procedures, including their rights to decline participation or withdraw, and how their data would be used and kept confidential. No ethical concerns were reported during the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of FGDs, KIs and workshop activities, including permission for any photography conducted as part of the research process. For additional details of the Cambodian fieldwork (including FGDs with youth) please refer to Bun et al., 2025.

Constraints and limitations

Online interviews: In most cases, online interviews worked well and benefited from auto-generated transcripts. However, limited bandwidth and frequent power outages in Zambia led to repeated disruptions, and one interview had to be abandoned. To mitigate this, phone calls were used as an alternative, which resulted in some improvement, although two interviews were interrupted due to poor mobile network coverage.

Participant recruitment: In Portugal and the United Kingdom, data collection coincided with school holidays, limiting access to educators and some other stakeholders. As a result, some interviews were

postponed until September. In the United Kingdom, the research scope was expanded to include additional organizations working on gender and masculinities in education, including boys' disengagement from school. This increased the sample size for interviews and workshop participation and enriched the data set.

Generalizability: As a small-scale, qualitative study, the findings are not broadly generalizable. Recruitment challenges in some countries resulted in smaller sample sizes than anticipated, especially among educators. Availability of evidence of success of the programmes reviewed was also limited.

Recency bias: Another potential limitation is the risk of recency bias, where recent events or experiences may disproportionately influence participants' responses. In Cambodia, participating students recalled only recent lessons, and educators only focused on their latest classroom activities. This could possibly skew the understanding of long-term trends or patterns. To address this, researchers used prompts to help trigger participants' memories and reflections. In Malawi, participants struggled to recall certain details of the VYA 2.0 programme, which ended in 2019. Many had since moved on, and as a result, some responses may not fully reflect their earlier experiences.

Language: The language used in the report does not intend to reinforce a deficit discourse and associated stigma through the use of terms like 'dropping out' and 'disengagement.' In some discourse, such terms imply

that early exit from schooling and education are primarily caused by boys themselves, along with their cultures and communities. 'Dropout' is a familiar short-hand term among study participants, but does have negative connotations. Researchers acknowledge that the terms 'drop out' and 'disengagement' may not fully capture the complexities of educational decision-making and the powerful 'push factors' within schools and education systems. The researchers were aware and exercised caution to avoid inadvertently compounding deficit discourses that boys and young men are frequently subjected to within educational contexts. Terms like 'toxic masculinity', for example, were deliberately avoided.

Gender: In focusing solely on boys and young men, and presumed cisgender identities, the researchers acknowledge the limitations of a broadly binary and less inclusive view of gender adopted within this report.

Report structure

Following this chapter, **Chapter 2** presents a literature review exploring the concept of boys' disengagement from education, examining key research on its causes and approaches used to address this. **Chapter 3** provides an overview of programme documentation outlining key characteristics of the selected programmes and interventions. **Chapters 4, 5** and **6** present a cross-case analysis of the study's key findings, highlighting

participants' perspectives on boys' disengagement, the potential of selected programmes to address it and to promote gender equality in and through education, and key challenges and enabling factors. **Chapter 7** discusses scalability and the potential for broader outcomes. The report concludes with key recommendations in **Chapter 8**.



2. Literature review



Key messages

- Disengagement is a dynamic process reflecting a deteriorating relationship between students and educational institutions.
- Conceptual research highlights the complex socialization dynamics influencing disengagement.
- Economic factors and social and parental expectations significantly affect boys' disengagement from education.
- Schools are key sites for both reinforcing and challenging gender norms.
- Poor implementation of well-intended policies can exacerbate disengagement.
- Programmes addressing boys' disengagement are predominately concentrated in high-income countries.
- Many interventions focus on sport, technology and role modelling to engage boys.
- More research is needed to identify which approaches are most effective in improving boys' engagement and promoting gender equality.

Introduction to boys' disengagement from education

Global initiatives aimed at achieving gender equality in and through education have concentrated on addressing gender norms hindering girls' access to and participation in education (UNESCO, 2018; Wang, 2023). This emphasis has contributed to notable progress towards SDG 4. However, there is growing awareness that boys also face challenges across primary, secondary and higher education (UNESCO, 2018). Gender norms in particular have been found to play an important role in learners' engagement or disengagement with school, influencing boys' learning, sense of belonging and behaviour (de Carvalho and Veiga, 2023).

Boys' lower achievement in reading is well documented. In 57 countries, boys consistently score lower than girls in reading (UNESCO, 2024b), a pattern echoed in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D) 2022 reports, which show boys scoring below girls in the United Kingdom and

other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2023). In England, 78 percent of girls achieved the expected reading level at age 11 compared to 69 percent of boys by age 16 (DfE, United Kingdom, 2019). Such reading gaps often widen through secondary school and significantly impact overall academic performance, as poor reading skills affect learners' performance in other subjects (OECD, 2023).

Beyond reading proficiency, enrolment trends also highlight boys' educational challenges in some contexts. For example, in Cambodia, girls have higher enrolment and completion rates than boys and outperform them academically (Chea et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2022b). Boys also have a higher dropout rate at 17 percent compared with 13.8 percent for girls (UNESCO, 2022b). Aria et al. (2020) argue that boys' disengagement is not an individual choice but rather is significantly shaped by household, community and institutional factors.

Box 2. Definition of boys' disengagement from education.

Boys' disengagement from education is understood as a gendered phenomenon partly rooted in societal norms and concepts of masculinity, which can lead boys and young men consciously or unconsciously to withdraw from education. Additional social, economic and cultural factors, in families, communities and schools, may also lead to boys' low engagement with education and contribute to school leaving/dropout. Disengagement from education can manifest in different forms such as lack of interest, poor participation, absenteeism, neglecting homework or exam preparation and ultimately, dropping out.

Source: UNESCO, 2022b, p. 24.

Disengagement from education is a complex process marked by students withdrawing from school-related activities, shaped by personal experiences and broader social and schooling contexts (McGrath, 2009; Duffy and Elwood, 2013). While some view this as active engagement in alternative pursuits (Grønberg, 2013), disengagement typically signals a negative shift – a deterioration in the relationship between the student and the educational institution. This erodes the student's sense of belonging and disrupts their educational journey (Archambault et al., 2022; Fredricks et al., 2019; Allen et al., 2016). Boys often turn to informal peer socialization, part-time work and sports, seeking the purpose, recognition and validation they feel is lacking in school.

Disengagement can also reflect deeper social and cultural patterns, including gender norms associated with masculinities and community values, some reinforced directly or indirectly within the school environment (Plan International, 2015; UNESCO, 2018, 2022b; Chea et al., 2024). It should therefore be seen not merely as disinterest, but as a complex process of seeking alternative forms of engagement aligned with boys' identities, values and needs.

The evidence in this report highlights how disengagement is influenced by multiple intersecting factors. Despite global efforts to uphold children's educational rights and needs (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023), the emphasis on girls' education often overlooks boys' socialization and their

specific challenges (Barker et al., 2012; Hensels et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2018, 2019c, and 2020).

Edström et al. (2015) note that in countries with high levels of poverty, including Malawi, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia, deeply rooted social norms, concepts of masculinity and gendered labour practices make it challenging to retain boys in school. In Malawi, gender parity efforts have seen girls' enrolment and completion improve dramatically but largely overlooked boys' concerns and needs in programme design and implementation (Chisamya et al., 2012). At the same time, according to authors, girls continue to face discrimination and gender inequitable views and behaviour. Globally, addressing these dual challenges is vital to reducing boys' disengagement and promoting equitable education for all.

Foundational to this review are sociological insights from Willis and Bourdieu. Willis (2017), in *Learning to Labour*, describes how working-class boys in England resist school authority structures, perceiving the education system as irrelevant to their future upward mobility. This resistance both reflects and reinforces social norms encoded by schooling. Bourdieu (1966) argues that schools privilege certain cultures, languages and values, reproducing a prevailing social order that leads to long-term social exclusion. Contemporary research emphasizes making schools positive spaces for children – particularly boys from poorer backgrounds – to internalize cultural values and norms (Moore and Phelps, 2020; Hod and Sagy, 2022).

Reasons for boys' disengagement from education

Socioeconomic factors

Poverty is a fundamental driver of school dropout. Children from low-income families are particularly vulnerable due to limited resources and support. Education participation can be disrupted by the inability to cover school-related expenses including tuition fees, learning materials, school uniforms and contributions to parent-teacher associations (Vokes and Mills, 2015; Herke et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2019, 2020). Poor families may also struggle with food insecurity, inadequate health care and poor neighbourhood dynamics, all of which negatively impact regular attendance (UNESCO, 2018). Socioeconomic factors affect both girls and boys. In this section, we document factors contributing specifically to boys' disengagement from education.

Traditional gendered labour roles within the household affect boys' participation in education. In Southern Africa, for example, boys from Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia are often taken out of school to herd cattle (UNESCO, 2022b). Boys from Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe frequently migrate to South Africa to work in mines (Matsa, 2020). In pastoralist families in Ethiopia and Mongolia, boys leave school to help with livestock and other labour market activities, which can be seasonal. These mobile and gendered labour systems disrupt boys' participation in formal education (Ward, 2015; Delaruelle et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2022b). In South Asia, boys often leave school to work in agriculture or construction to support household economic needs (Ansell et al., 2020; Dyer and Rajan, 2023). In such settings, the imperative of

immediate economic survival reinforces a cycle of limited educational participation, chronic absenteeism and school dropout – thereby constraining future economic opportunities and perpetuating a cycle of poverty (Sunam, 2020; Brauner-Otto et al., 2022).

Historically, formal education has been seen as a stable route to professional employment, particularly after the Second World War (Ng and Feldman, 2007; Westaway et al., 2009). However, since the 1980s, many regions have experienced an expansion of educational access but shrinking formal employment opportunities. In parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, young people with educational qualifications face limited job prospects, contributing to the perception that formal education holds little economic value (De Wet and Mkwanzani, 2014; Nascimento Moreira et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2022b). This is particularly the case in countries where gender norms position boys as potential breadwinners. For example, a UNICEF study found that boys disengage when they find education to have decreasing relevance to their current and future needs, a trend particularly pronounced in rural and coastal areas (UNICEF, 2019).

Families often face the dilemma of whether to invest in an education that may not yield returns or to get boys working right away (Cardoso and Verner, 2007). Poverty can lead boys to leave school early to acquire practical business skills, with their immediate contributions to family income a way of meeting wider social expectations (Corbett, 2004; UNICEF, 2019; Nyaphisi and Mosia, 2025).

In many locations, families choose for boys to work. For example, boys in Cambodia living near the border with Thailand often leave school to pursue labour migration opportunities (Chea et al., 2024). In Nova Scotia, (Canada), some boys disengage from school for better employment opportunities in family fishing businesses. In countries such as India and the Philippines, boys frequently drop out to support their families through agriculture and informal labour (Nascimento Moreira et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2022b).

In certain contexts, it is easier for boys without secondary education to find a job than girls (Saavedra et al., 2022). Global trends indicate that more girls complete tertiary education while boys often pursue alternative pathways in business, manual labour or the military (OECD, 2021). In the United States of America, these pathways often

align with traditional masculine roles and offer financial stability (Autor, 2019). The military sector continues to attract boys and young men interested in stable jobs without the need for a formal academic trajectory (Elder et al., 2010; Wang-Lang et al., 2012).

Even in settings where boys underperform academically, they may still fare better in the labour market due to persistent gender inequalities. In Bangladesh and Malawi, for example, narrowing gender gaps in years of schooling favouring girls have not translated into improved labour market opportunities for women (Chisamya et al., 2012). In some contexts, boys benefit from positive discrimination in employment. In Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, guaranteed access to government jobs and support regardless of educational outcomes reduces boys' motivation to stay in school (UNESCO 2022b, 2022c).

Social and gender norms

Studies show that boys and girls start to adopt, construct and internalize gender norms and masculinity early in their childhood (Kane, 2006; Vu et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2022b). An overview of examples of gender norms influencing boys' relationship to education can be found in **Table 2**. Masculinity is often framed in opposition to femininity, shaping societal ideas of what it means to be a man or, conversely, to not be a woman. In many contexts, an ideal man is considered heterosexual, emotionally tough, physically strong, aggressive, even violent, and resilient, taking on a 'breadwinner' or 'protector' role, while rejecting emotional expression and care-giving (Heilman et al., 2017).

This dominant version of masculinity establishes hierarchies over women, girls and minority groups (Connell, 2000), and can negatively affect boys' and men's physical and mental well-being (Marcus et al., 2018). Moreover, the pressure to conform to traditional masculine norms can have social, physical and mental health repercussions, which may influence boys' decisions to engage with or withdraw from formal education (Adeyeye, 2017; Schroeder et al., 2022).

Connell (1996) argues that gender norms are shaped through people's daily interactions, and some scholars emphasize the home environment as the crucial site for shaping these norms (Vu et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2023). In their work from the Peruvian Amazon, Padilla et al. (2024) document how gender norms are inculcated and challenged among children aged 4 and 5 and show the role neighbourhoods and friendship groups play in the shaping of gender norms.

In many poorer contexts, where mass education is a relatively new phenomenon, a generational gap exists between older men who lack formal education and younger men who are expected to attend school (Bourdillon and Boyden, 2014; Roberts, 2018). Older men frequently retain a mentoring role during adolescent boys' transition into adulthood (Ratele, 2008; Tuelo and Munsaka, 2021; Schroeder et al., 2022).

This intergenerational dynamic sometimes frames schooling as an obstacle to achieving social adulthood, with limited community or household support for continued education (Nyaphisi and Mosia, 2025). For example, Ezegwu and Cin (2022) found among three Nigerian ethnic groups that boys often leave school early to pursue what they call 'worth creation'. Similarly, research in Uganda (Siu et al., 2012) highlights how harmful masculinities develop among young men who leave school to work in artisanal gold mining, leading them to avoid HIV testing and resist treatment to project strength and independence.

Several studies have shown that boys' educational journeys are influenced by rites of passage in certain cultures and contexts (Skinner et al., 2013; Siweya et al., 2018; Schroeder et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2022d). Rites of passage often orient boys toward societal ideals of what 'makes' a man in a given society, prioritizing traditional masculine identities and discouraging continued education once these rites are completed (Kaunda, 2013; Pérez et al., 2015; Schroeder et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2022d). Although these rites intend to equip boys with skills for adulthood, they can make sustained engagement with formal education more difficult (Malisha et al., 2008).

For example, circumcision ceremonies, a common rite of passage in many societies (Ratele, 2008; Skinner et al., 2013; Schroeder et al., 2022), can also promote behaviours linked to social adulthood that can make engagement in formal education a challenge. In Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia, some boys are encouraged post-ceremony to engage in sexual activities (Munthali et al., 2004), which can lead to early and unintended pregnancy, causing both short- and long-term school absenteeism and dropout.

The internalization of cultural values and norms can also shape boys' attitudes toward learning. In studies from

Chile, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, many boys perceive reading as a feminized activity (Skinner and McHale, 2018; Espinoza and Strasser, 2020) while boys in Kuwait describe reading as 'uncool' (Al-Adwani and Al-Fadley, 2017). To align with the masculine ideals of their peers, boys stop reading, leaving keen readers feeling unsupported (Espinoza and Strasser, 2020). Such gendered perceptions can reduce boys' motivation and foster detachment from educational environments (Mungoo, 2017) for fear of being categorized as 'unmanly' and not adhering to masculine norms.

Table 2. Examples of gender norms influencing boys' relationship to education

Norms	Examples	References
Boys as economic contributors/breadwinners	Boys in lower secondary schools in Jamaica leave school to contribute to household income or due to early employment opportunities.	Stampini et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2022b
Subjects and career choice	In Cambodia, boys are drawn to vocational skills like car mechanics, which offer stable earning opportunities. In South Africa, boys prioritize competitive sports and athleticism, exhibiting the school ethos and a preference for physical skills over academic excellence. This culture influences boys' exclusion from education.	UNESCO, 2016 Bantjes and Nieuwoudt, 2014
Literacy and language skills for boys held in low value	Boys show lower engagement in reading, with gaps widening towards the end of secondary school in the United Kingdom.	Clark, 2012; DfE, United Kingdom, 2019; Scholes, 2021
Strict expectations in schools of gender norms	Boys are expected to adhere to the school culture by demonstrating emotional endurance, physical toughness and aggression, and inhibiting vulnerabilities. These influences lead boys to avoid school, avoid requesting support on academic subjects, and eventually disengage from school in metropolitan areas in the southwestern United States of America and London (United Kingdom).	Rogers et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2018
Boys conform to traditional masculinity models	Boys in South Africa face expectations to embody a tough masculinity, leading to risk-taking and disengagement.	UNESCO, 2022b

Source: Authors.

School-related factors

School is recognized as an important space to develop knowledge, skills and values, including those that promote gender equality. Yet schools can also reflect and perpetuate harmful norms, stereotypes and behaviours through the curricula, and learning materials and practices (Marcus et al., 2024; Unterhalter, 2019). Elementary schools in particular have been identified as critical sites in defining an unofficial or 'hidden curriculum' that shapes gendered socialization (Adler et al., 1992). Research highlights early adolescence (ages 10 to 14) as a

critical period for reforming, reinforcing or intensifying the gendered messages learned at younger ages (Kågesten et al., 2016; Marcus et al., 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2021). Through socialisation, schools and educational initiatives can shape social and gender norms, expectations and practices.

Boys' disengagement is often shaped by the disciplinary cultures of schools. Instances of corporal punishment in Ghana (Dunne et al., 2013), verbal abuse in Botswana

(Mungoo, 2017), and intimidating language in Australia, Jamaica, Lesotho and Samoa (Jha and Kelleher, 2006), all affect boys' motivation to attend school. Rather than correcting behaviours, these practices frequently engender feelings of resentment and lead to forms of resistance and avoidance (Ward, 2015). Harsh discipline and corporal punishment also reinforce masculine expectations that boys should 'toughen up' (Pells et al., 2018), normalizing aggression as part of masculine identity. Socioeconomic disadvantage compounds these challenges. Dunne et al. (2021) document that, in several sub-Saharan African countries, children from poor households are punished for parents' failure to meet school financial commitments or for their absence while supporting the family to meet their survival needs.

Boys respond to these disciplinary environments in different ways. Some try to become less visible in the school environment (Kågesten et al., 2016; Barker et al., 2020), while others openly disobey school rules and reject educators' authority (Morris, 2012), triggering further punishments. Ward (2015) uses a metaphor of 'chameleonization' to describe how boys adjust behaviours to align with their peers' expectations and school-based demands and situations.

School-based violence and bullying by peers (male and female classmates) and older boys further contributes to boys' disengagement (Barker et al., 2012). While both boys and girls are impacted by school-based violence, patterns differ: girls face a higher risk of sexual violence, while boys are more likely to experience physical violence and bullying (Wandera et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2022d).

The everyday reproduction of gender norms in school settings influences the levels of disengagement, absenteeism and dropout rates among adolescent boys. Evidence from both developed and developing countries

indicate that educators often interact with boys in ways that aggravate boys' disengagement (Åhslund and Boström, 2018; Barnett, 2018; Edwards and Jones, 2018; Skipper and Fox, 2022; Kaahwa et al., 2023). Studies from England, Nigeria and Uganda show that educators often label lower-achieving boys as disruptive and aggressive, while lower-achieving girls are viewed as compliant or well-behaved (Collins and Gazeley, 2021; Adeyeye, 2017; Kaahwa et al., 2023).

Gendered assumptions in school not only marginalize boys but can also perpetuate dominant masculinities including aggressive and risky behaviour, as educators reinforce gender stereotypes (Levtov et al., 2014; Kaahwa et al., 2023; Marcus et al., 2024; Skipper and Fox, 2022). In Sweden, Åhslund and Boström (2018) found that some educators expect less from boys and view boys' behaviour negatively. Low expectations from educators can lead to student disengagement and lower performance, reinforcing initial, biased beliefs (Bouderbane, 2020).

Educators' low expectations and bias may disproportionately affect boys, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A systematic review of multiple studies found consistent evidence of an association between low student socio-economic status and low educator expectations for both boys and girls. Further, evidence indicates that teachers tend to hold lower expectations for ethnic minority groups, particularly for boys and their reading skills (Wang et al., 2018).

Frustration with education systems further contribute to boys' disengagement. Poor alignment between national examinations and the quality or relevance of curriculum delivery can disadvantage lower-performing male students and reinforce their disengagement (Chea and Nhem, 2025).

Individual and interpersonal factors

Though the role of the school environment is acknowledged above, individual decisions by boys and their relationships with peers also influence their disengagement from education. Boys may experience low self-esteem, academic struggles, exam failure, engagement in romantic relationships, illness, age and social isolation (Momo et al., 2019).

Across sub-Saharan Africa, low self-esteem, academic struggles and exam failures drive boys' disengagement, with absenteeism identified as a predictor of dropout (Pov et al., 2022). Class repetition often increases the likelihood of dropout, even among boys with high educational aspirations. Evidence also shows that

academic stress and boredom associated with repeated failure negatively reduces motivation and engagement (Shepherd, 2017; Pascoe et al., 2020). Studies in South Africa (Boshego, 2012) and Malawi (Jere, 2014), highlight patterns of deliberate absenteeism for fun, class skipping and eventual dropout, while research in Uganda and Zimbabwe suggests that boys disengage when schooling is perceived as offering limited returns in contexts of high youth unemployment (Tukundane et al., 2015; Mukwambo, 2021).

Peers are an important force that shape masculine identities and play a central role in shaping boys' educational choices. Pressure to conform to peer gender

norms often draws boys into risky behaviours, including truancy, alcohol, smoking and early sexual experience (Sherriff, 2007; Munsaka, 2009; Olawole-Isaac et al., 2018; Riva et al., 2018; Jumbe et al., 2021; Morojele, 2011). Peer influence also contributes to substance use, which impairs cognitive functioning, social stability and school participation. Marijuana use, in particular, has been associated with school dropout among boys in Botswana (Riva et al., 2018), France (Legleye et al., 2010) and South Africa (Morojele, 2011).

Policy-related factors

Policies addressing boys' educational challenges are often limited in scope and reach. A review of national educational policies in 19 countries where boys have lower enrolment or completion rates found that only four of them – Bangladesh, the Gambia, Jamaica and New Zealand – include strategies specifically targeting boys (UNESCO, 2022b).

Developing inclusive and equitable policies requires recognition that students' difficulties frequently emerge from systemic features of education, including curriculum design, teacher pedagogies, learning environments, and assessment practices (UNESCO, 2017). Research on support for students with 'special educational needs' and 'learners with disabilities' shows how deficit-oriented approaches can unintentionally reinforce disengagement (Younger and Warrington, 2005; Esposito and Carroll, 2019). Policies on inclusive education need to take a broader approach, taking gender and the intersections of different characteristics of learners into account.

Research in the United States of America indicates that boys, especially those from racial minority backgrounds, are disproportionately channelled from schools into more punitive educational environments, further disconnecting them from mainstream schooling and putting them at risk of delinquency and crime (Morris, 2012). Zero tolerance policies disproportionately affect African-American boys, leading to their exclusion from formal education and contributing to their large-scale integration into school disciplinary and incarceration settings (Bell, 2015; Johnson and Johnson, 2023). Such policies also demonstrate a deficit approach to boys' education. In Peru, 1,878 out of the 1,965 young people (96 percent) placed in Diagnostic and Rehabilitation Centres in 2016 were male, with only 10 percent of this population having completed secondary education or above (UNESCO, 2022e).

Peer dynamics also influence boys' engagement in sports betting and gambling for quick income, as documented in Malawi (Ndala, 2021), and contribute to the excessive use of smartphones and social media. In Cambodia and Peru, such digital distractions reduce study time and concentration, leading to poor academic performance and increased dropout (UNESCO 2022e, Chea et al. 2024).

These experiences intersect with individual and peer influences, demonstrating the complexities which boys navigate to make their decisions to continue schooling, leave temporarily or drop out completely.

In the United Arab Emirates, compulsory military service for young men aged 18 to 30 is designed to instil skills in leadership, teamwork, resilience, discipline and order, supporting both personal development and national security by cultivating a responsible and skilled youth population (Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces, United Arab Emirates, 2014). Young men who finish high school serve 16 months, whereas those who do not complete high school serve three years. Extended periods without engagement in academic activities or the regular use of English can make reintegration into education challenging (Gulf Magazine, 2025; UNESCO, 2022f). However, partnerships with universities, including scholarships have been planned in 2025 to support reintegration (Gulf Magazine, 2025).

These examples highlight the need for educational policies and support structures that prioritize retention and inclusion, rather than segregation and exclusion, ensuring that boys remain engaged in education and have equitable opportunities to succeed (Parsons, 2009; Skiba et al., 2014; Borela, 2020).



Interventions addressing boys' disengagement from education

The literature review also examined the wider ecosystem of programmes addressing boys' disengagement from education. Key approaches include economic incentives, notably conditional cash transfers; vocational skills and entrepreneurship education; the use of sports and technology to support boys' literacy; and boy-focused school interventions. It is important

to note that not all programmes directly target boys' disengagement directly or adopt a gender-transformative approach. Many respond to factors associated with disengagement (see above). Moreover, much of the evidence of programme outcomes and impacts tends to be self-reported, with limited robust, independent impact evaluations.

Programmes addressing socioeconomic factors

Economic incentives

Programmes that reduce the opportunity costs of education, such as scholarships and conditional cash transfers, can help keep boys engaged in school. In many contexts, boys from poorer households temporarily leave school to raise money for school-related expenses (Jere, 2014). Social programmes that provide economic support to these households can prolong boys' schooling and improve learning outcomes.

Evidence from many countries demonstrates the effectiveness of cash transfers in reducing boys' disengagement. In Nicaragua, boys who received conditional cash transfers for five years achieved better grades in home language and mathematics compared to those supported for only two years (Millán et al., 2019). In Mexico, families benefiting from food and education grants tied to school attendance saw boys gain an additional 10 months of schooling (Fiszbein et al., 2009; UNESCO, 2022b) and improved labour market outcomes (Behrman et al., 2011).

In Jamaica, the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH) targets boys at risk of dropout through conditional cash transfers. The programme monitored boys in lower secondary schools and found that early school leaving was often motivated by socioeconomic pressures, including contributing to household income or seeking early employment (Stampini et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2022b). PATH address this by providing a 10 percent increase in payments for families with boys in upper primary classes. This intervention improved boys' attendance and performance in Grade 6 exams, enabling boys

from poorer families to progress to higher-quality secondary schools (Stampini et al., 2018; Clarke, 2020; UNESCO, 2022b).

Vocational education and entrepreneurship training

In many contexts, vocational education is promoted as an alternative pathway for boys and girls who are not academically engaged. This education is often highly gendered, with programmes targeted at boys and typically emphasizing physical strength and occupational settings which have historically favoured men. For example, skills such as car mechanics or welding are promoted because they are seen as male occupations and because they are felt to offer well-paying and stable work (Yok et al., 2019; Veung, 2024).

In Malawi, vocational education has been one way of boosting boys' social status as they respond to the social expectation of 'man as a provider' (Bourdillon and Boyden, 2014). Here, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes for marginalized groups combine accredited training skills like welding, carpentry and tailoring with basic literacy and numeracy education to support those without formal qualifications, usually a prerequisite for such training (Jere, 2012). Dungey and Ansell (2022) document the growing popularity of business education in Lesotho, where entrepreneurship classes have been brought into the curriculum. These programmes have potential but struggle with implementation challenges around teacher training, limited resources and poor alignment with market needs (World Bank, 2018; ILO, 2019; Dungey and Ansell, 2022).

Programmes addressing social and gender norms

Schools are important settings for programmes to address boys' disengagement from education. These initiatives can include school-sponsored extra-curricular activities that take boys out of the regular learning environment to build skills and confidence, or they can be integrated directly into the formal teaching curriculum. By embedding programmes within the wider school environment, initiatives can align with boys' interests and learning styles, helping to foster a sense of relevance and motivation.

Another key area relates to social and gender norms. Initiatives in this area often leverage sport and technology to improve boys' literacy skills along with mentorship and role modelling. Some programmes build on existing gendered expectations, while others work to challenge or deconstruct those expectations, promoting more equitable notions of masculinity and education.

Leveraging sport and technology for boys' literacy skills

Several initiatives use sports to promote boys' literacy. Premier League Reading Stars in the United Kingdom and Kicking and Reading in Germany use football to improve boys' engagement with reading. These programmes target boys during critical transitional ages in boys' educational journeys – 9 to 11 for upper primary and 11 to 15 for lower secondary (Pabion and Clark, 2015).

In Premier League Reading Stars, football is used as an extracurricular hook to encourage reading, while Kicking and Reading integrates football into the school curriculum, providing boys with year-long support and personalized literacy assistance. Both programmes use professional athletes as relatable role models and emphasize the combination of sports with literacy development. This direct engagement with boys, supported by educators' involvement, has led to improved daily reading habits and positive attitudes towards reading, evidenced by the increase in daily readers in the United Kingdom case study and Germany's 'book slam' celebrations showcasing reading experiences (Pabion and Clark, 2015). Improving reading skills also extends to improved language development and improved engagement with the wider curriculum.

Technology can be another effective tool for supporting boys' literacy, particularly for those struggling with traditional learning methods. A study by the National Literacy Trust in the United Kingdom found that boys aged 11 to 16, who typically report lower enjoyment and achievement in reading than girls of this age, benefit from such approaches (Picton et al., 2019). OECD research similarly indicates that boys feel more comfortable and

confident when reading using technology (OECD, 2015). However, some studies in the United Kingdom and United States of America have found that boys tend to focus on reading material on sports and games (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002; Picton et al., 2019). While technology can enhance engagement in developed countries, limited access in lower-resource contexts poses a risk of exclusion and highlights a key challenge in using digital tools to address boys' disengagement in education globally.

Mentorship and role modelling

Mentoring programmes, such as Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) in India and the Boys' Can Mentoring Programme in Jamaica, leverage the involvement of multiple stakeholders to raise boys' aspirations, prevent violence in and out of school and promote dialogue around gender roles and masculinity (UNESCO, 2022b). These initiatives influence young boys' perceptions of gender roles and masculinity.

MAVA, for example, involves over 700 mentors, extend its outreach to young men up to age 25. The programme integrates school- and community-based strategies, including collaborative and interactive activities like theatre for development, film festivals, workshops and social media. MAVA uses outreach and interactive mentorship workshops in both educational and community settings (UNESCO, 2022b, 2024a, 2024b; Equimundo, 2023).

In Jamaica, the three-year Boys' Can Mentoring programme was established in 15 schools and involves mentors, educators, guardians and boys as mentees (UNESCO, 2022b). Participants engage in activities focused on personal and career development, conflict management and problem-solving skills, with the aim of encouraging school attendance and fostering healthy relationships with their peers and the community.

Interactive, skills-based learning programmes

Programmes targeting boys' behavioural skills, self-confidence and practical knowledge, such as the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research in the United Arab Emirates, can positively affect boys' school retention (UNESCO, 2022b). Boys participated one day a week outside their regular classroom to develop behavioural skills, build self-confidence and acquire practical skills through hands-on projects. A toolkit was created to expand this programme to additional schools (UNESCO, 2022f). A 2018 survey found that all participating students reported better concentration in class following the programme (Rizvi, 2019). By offering alternative, hands-on learning models,

tapping into boys' interests, and promoting the emotional and social development that traditional classroom settings may neglect, the programme addressed disengagement. Project Khel in India has used interactive learning and reflective discussion to help boys in engaging and gaining knowledge and skills in promoting gender equality (**Box 3**).

Curricula that balance practical content and knowledge with space for critical reflection on gender norms and stereotypes can promote and embed gender-transformative change while enhancing boys' non-cognitive skills and engagement with education (Marcus et al., 2024).

Box 3. Interactive learning and opportunities for reflection help nurture social skills

Project Khel in India targets learners between the ages of 8 and 18, with a particular focus on boys. The project works with both public and private schools and includes after-school activities in diverse locations in Lucknow. Using age-appropriate games to model real-life scenarios, followed by reflective discussions, facilitators (play-educators) aim to address topics on gender equality, gender-based violence, child marriage and reproductive health. The desired outcomes are to enhance self-esteem and improve decision-making capabilities and personal growth, helping boys remain connected to their educational journey and promoting healthier attitudes towards gender roles. This, in turn, benefits both boys and their broader communities by shifting perspectives on masculinity and fostering respect.

Source: Adapted from UNESCO, 2022b and 2024a.

Summary

Boys' disengagement from education is a complex phenomenon. It requires multilayered analysis, considering social, cultural and economic factors and their intersection. Critical issues identified by this review include the restrictive concept of harmful masculinity, the socioeconomic challenges faced by poorer boys, and the crucial role school environments play in the dynamics of engagement and disengagement. There is some evidence that gender-transformative programmes offer a possible approach to boys' disengagement

through changing the terms on which all learners, educators and community members understand the role of schooling. Programmes which aim to retain boys in school and foster long-term social transformation need to create supportive social, cultural and economic environments. Programmes which leverage sports, technology and role modelling show some potential for engaging boys. However, more research is needed to evaluate their effectiveness and scalability, while recognizing that structural factors play a vital role.





3. Overview of the selected programmes

Key messages

- A review of the six selected programmes found that all demonstrated the potential for culturally adaptable and scalable components.
- Some programmes addressed boys' disengagement from education through an explicit focus on gendered dynamics and harmful masculine norms, while adopted a more general approach without a clear gender lens.
- A key common feature across most programmes was the inclusion of a structured programme of activities that educators could integrate into classroom practice.
- Educator training emerged as a central enabling factor for effective programme implementation.
- Partnerships with civil society organizations, universities or state institutions were consistent features that strengthened programme design, delivery and reach.
- Several programmes showed gaps in monitoring and evaluation systems, limiting their capacity to assess outcomes and track long-term impacts.
- The strength of evidence for gender-transformative impact was uneven across programmes.

Introduction

This study reviewed documentation on six selected programmes that include elements with the potential to re-engage boys in education by fostering inclusive and supportive school environments and addressing the social and behavioural factors associated with disengagement. Key focus areas include gender equity, violence prevention, mental health, emotional well-being and healthy relationships.

This chapter presents an overview of intervention designs, key strategies and components, stage of implementation and reported outcomes and impact. A detailed mapping of programme topics and components is presented in **Table 3**. The key characteristics of the programmes are shown in **Table 4**.

Summary of selected programmes

These selected programmes address boys' educational disengagement by targeting its root causes through three interconnected levers: transforming restrictive gender norms, advancing educational equity, and fostering inclusive school climates. Tailored to diverse contexts, these programmes had a range of different aims including

fostering positive attitudes and behaviours, ensuring long-term engagement in learning, and promoting gender sensitivity within and beyond educational settings (**Table 3**).



Table 3. Detailed mapping of programme topics, components and activities

	Programme	Life Skills for Equality Project (LSEP)	Gender Equity Movement (GEMS) in Schools	Very Young Adolescence 2.0 (VYA 2.0)	Happy Schools	Lifting Limits	Connect with Respect (CwR)
	Country	Cambodia	India	Malawi	Portugal	United Kingdom	Zambia
Area 1: Topics covered in lesson plans and content	Gender and sex		✓				✓
	Violence	✓	✓	✓			✓
	Gender-based violence						✓
	Violence in schools	✓					✓
	Representation					✓	
	Masculinity	✓	✓				
	Body	✓	✓	✓			
	Mental health and emotions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Sexuality				✓		
	Gender norms and roles	✓	✓	✓			✓
	Relationships	✓	✓	✓			✓
	Research and study skills	✓				✓	✓
	Communication	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Conflict resolution	✓	✓	✓			✓
Area 2: Key components	Teacher training		✓		✓	✓	✓
	Use of external facilitators	✓		✓	✓		
	Integration into existing curriculum					✓	
	Online resources	✓				✓	
	Engagement with families	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	Whole-school approach	✓	✓		✓	✓	
	Orientation of school staff	✓	✓			✓	
Area 3: Activities	Student activism/campaigns		✓	✓	✓		
	Diary		✓				
	Lesson plans	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

Data source: Research finding of authors, 2025.

The primary beneficiaries of all of the selected programmes, except Lifting Limits in the United Kingdom, are adolescent boys and girls, ranging in age from 11 to 14, corresponding to upper primary and/or early secondary. The Lifting Limits programme targets younger

primary students (early years up to Grade 6), although their main work is through teacher training. While the other programmes are offered to boys and girls, the LSEP in Cambodia and 'GEMS for Boys' initiative in Rajasthan, India, focus specifically on boys.

LSEP (Cambodia)

A two-year programme that supports boys to develop life skills to succeed in school and beyond, while also increasing awareness of harmful gender norms that limit them and their female peers from reaching their full potential (Jeong et al., 2023). Implemented initially as a pilot in four schools in Cambodia in 2021, the programme expanded to two additional schools in 2022. The curriculum comprises 16 structured sessions delivered over a semester (approximately 4 months), with the intention of establishing continuity through refresher sessions in subsequent years.

The programme is built on the rationale that challenging traditional gender norms can foster respect and empathy in school environments. Its objectives include strengthening boys' communication skills, conflict resolution capacities and abilities to build positive relationships (Jeong et al., 2023). By equipping boys with these life skills, the programme aims to foster an understanding of gender equality and reduce aggression and absenteeism in schools.

The primary beneficiaries are adolescent boys aged 11 to 14. The curriculum prioritizes 10 key life skills critical for boys to succeed in school and beyond. Sessions are delivered through interactive pedagogies including role plays, discussions and reflective exercises aimed at enhancing self-awareness, empathy and conflict resolution skills (Jeong et al., 2023).

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) use a mixed methods approach to assess shifts in boys' gender attitudes and life skills. Early results show increased awareness of gender equality, although boys often endorse equality in principle while resisting giving up personal privileges (Room to Read, 2023). Evaluation tools include pre- and post-assessments focused on changes in attitudes and behaviours, particularly reductions in aggression and improvements in empathy.

GEMS (India)

This programme is rooted in the need to address deep-seated gender norms that perpetuate discrimination and violence. It is delivered through teacher training and a structured curriculum of seven modules and 22 sessions, delivered over two years. The sessions use facilitated discussions and activities to encourage students to think critically about gender roles, promoting mutual respect and collaboration (Achyut et al., 2017).

Following a pilot phase in Mumbai in 2008, elements of the programme have been implemented in semi-urban and rural government schools across several states in India. Since 2019, a programme offshoot, 'GEMS for Boys', has been rolled out in the state of Rajasthan.

GEMS supports continuous professional development for educators, including refresher courses and community engagement sessions. These training equip educators to address topics such as gender, bodies, mental health and relationships, and to facilitate inclusive and reflective classroom discussions. The monitoring framework includes regular feedback from educators and students to assess shifts in attitudes and changes in the school climate. External evaluations also assess broader impacts on students' behaviour and gender relations.

Very Young Adolescence 2.0 (Malawi)

Developed by Equimundo in collaboration with the University of Malawi College of Medicine and implemented by the Centre for Alternatives for Victimized Women and Children (CAVWOC) by fostering care, this programme was initiated in 2020 in four urban and two rural primary schools in Malawi. Implementation was

interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was not completed due to subsequent funding constraints.

VYA 2.0 engages young adolescents in discussions and participatory activities to strengthen social skills and self-confidence. It supports them to recognize and challenge harmful gender norms and unequal power dynamics

with the aim to promote gender equality and improve sexual and reproductive health (Mulenga et al., 2020). It combines a gender-transformative approach – which encourages youth to critically reflect on and reshape rigid masculinities and femininities that drive inequality – with social-emotional learning (SEL).

The programme is delivered through a 12-session curriculum, where boys and girls learn to question power imbalances, support girls' empowerment, and foster boys' empathy and connection to others. Sessions range from 45 minutes to two hours, with structured opportunities for reflection during and after activities. Evidence suggests that these reflective components contribute to a

greater adoption of lessons learned. While most sessions are conducted in mixed-gender spaces, single-sex groups are used for topics related to bodily changes such as menstruation, to ensure comfort and openness.

Capacity-building is also included in VYA 2.0 for facilitators who deliver the after-school programme, alongside training for healthcare providers, police, mothers, and members of parent-teacher associations. This broader engagement emphasizes local relevance and cultural sensitivity, creating a dual support structure that reinforces programme messages through both school and community channels (Mulenga et al., 2020).

Happy Schools (Portugal)

Adapted from the UNESCO framework for 'happy schools' (UNESCO, 2016) and grounded in theoretical frameworks published in academic journals, this intervention seeks to systematically reform educational culture and school environments to prioritize happiness and well-being both as a means and an outcome of quality education. It takes a whole-school approach, engaging a broad range of stakeholders, and aims to equip educators with the skills to promote students' well-being, reduce bullying and foster supportive interactions within the school environment (UNESCO, 2024c). Core components include training modules such as 'Happy schools: How to promote happiness in schools', which guide teachers in creating emotionally healthy and inclusive classrooms, alongside student-led initiatives.

The intervention was piloted in Cartaxo, Portugal, with twelve participating schools. The first stage, 'Diagnostic', assessed the level of happiness among students, parents, educators and school assistants through surveys. Classroom groups of learners contributed to the analysis and preparing visual materials to present the findings. The second stage focuses on acting on the diagnosis.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation use well-being surveys conducted among students and educators. These data informed improvements and assess whether increased happiness correlates with reductions in bullying and higher levels of student engagement. By incorporating well-being as a key performance indicator, the Happy Schools initiative encourages schools to adopt happiness as a measurable and actionable goal for educational quality.

Lifting Limits (United Kingdom)

This programme focuses on resource development and educator training to dismantle gender stereotypes in primary schools. Its objectives are to increase awareness among students and educators about gender stereotypes, using classroom activities to encourage boys and girls to question and transcend these limitations (Lifting Limits, 2019). By addressing biases that may limit boys' engagement and self-expression, this programme promotes an inclusive environment where all students feel unrestricted by gender expectations.

The pilot was implemented in five primary schools in London Borough of Camden in 2018-2019 and has since grown into a widely recognized programme across the United Kingdom educational settings (Lifting Limits, 2019). Designed as a flexible, year-long initiative, schools

are encouraged to integrate the programme into the daily curriculum. Resources and toolkits are available for long-term use, enabling schools to maintain the principles beyond the initial year.

A core component of Lifting Limits is the provision of a comprehensive toolkit for educators, containing structured lesson plans and activities aimed at reducing gender stereotypes. Educators receive initial training to implement these resources effectively and have access to additional online resources that support integration into existing curricula. The programme's M&E process includes feedback loops with educators and students to assess shifts in gender-related attitudes, alongside periodic classroom observations to evaluate the programme's ongoing effectiveness (Lifting Limits, 2019).

Connect with Respect (Zambia)

This international initiative aims to prevent school-related gender-based violence by promoting respectful relationships and positive social norms among students (UNESCO, 2022a). The programme uses a curriculum tool with seven core topics, each with two to three activities, to help educators build knowledge and awareness around violence prevention and gender equality. Classroom activities are designed to strengthen students' knowledge, attitudes and interpersonal skills, including practical skills for managing disputes and valuing diversity.

The programme was launched in Zambia in 2019, developed collaboratively with local educators to align with the school calendar and implemented across 24 schools in 13 districts. Each cycle spans a full academic

term (approximately three months), with resources designed for integration into existing social studies and personal development courses in the secondary school curriculum. Teacher training prepares educators to deliver the programme including through storytelling, role playing and discussions (UNESCO 2022a).

Monitoring involves pre- and post-intervention surveys to measure changes in attitudes towards gender equality and peer respect (UNESCO, 2022a). Evaluation data focus on classroom dynamics, with attention to reductions in conflict and increased positive social interactions among students.

Table 4 summarizes the key characteristics of the selected programmes.



Table 4. Summary of key characteristics of the selected programmes

Intervention	Life Skills for Equality Project – Cambodia	Gender Equity Movement in Schools – India	Very Young Adolescence 2.0 – Malawi	Happy Schools – Portugal	Lifting Limits – United Kingdom	Connect with Respect – Zambia
Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support boys to develop skills to succeed in school and beyond To engage boys in classroom discussions about gender equality and challenge harmful gender norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To promote equitable attitudes and norms related to gender and violence among girls and boys To strengthen their understanding and skills to resolve conflicts without violence To create a safe school culture that supports egalitarian and non-violent attitudes and behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To engage very young adolescent boys and girls in questioning, recognizing and challenging harmful gender norms and unequal power dynamics To promote gender equality and improve sexual and reproductive health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To advocate for a transformative reform of education and a paradigm shift to put happiness at the core of education policy and practice To deliver an educational programme to educational leaders and educators To create a diagnostic tool to assess school happiness levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide educators with the skills and resources to recognize and correct gender bias that can go unnoticed in schools To support students in challenging gender inequalities in the wider world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To advance interpersonal skills and prevent school-related gender-based violence To advance gender equality and respectful gender relationships by highlighting how gender is socially constructed, drawing students' attention to factors impacting on gender identities, behaviours and experiences
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boys have improved knowledge of gender-related concepts Improved interaction among boys and girls Programme facilitators and educators are more informed on gender issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive and significant shift in attitudes towards gender and violence Changes in school culture, communication and interaction between boys and girls Changes in experiences of violence and reporting, enhanced recognition of violence, and increased bystander intervention Decline in perpetration of violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in confidence to speak up for girls Change in how young male participants defended the importance of equality between men and women Increase in the number of gender-based violence cases being reported by youth participants Changes in how adolescents interact at home (doing house chores, playing sports, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More principals prioritize creating a happy school culture, consider their school a safe and caring place, report a positive school climate, and prioritize students' and educators' well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased staff awareness and confidence to challenge gender stereotyping For students, increased awareness and acceptance of more diverse roles and possibilities for women and girls and men and boys, increased awareness and understanding of gender stereotypes, enhanced critical thinking and ability to challenge gender stereotypes, reduced polarization and improved relations between boys and girls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved relationship skills, attitudes towards gender equality at school and home and gender-based violence, and knowledge about how to support peers affected by gender-based violence, and decreased exposure to sexual harassment

Intervention	Life Skills for Equality Project – Cambodia	Gender Equity Movement in Schools – India	Very Young Adolescence 2.0 – Malawi	Happy Schools – Portugal	Lifting Limits – United Kingdom	Connect with Respect – Zambia
Intended impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The programme expects to improve students' knowledge, promote changes in attitudes towards gender, and train educators for future replications of the programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase gender-equitable attitudes and decrease students' tolerance for violent behaviour Enhanced communication on issues of gender violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers now know how to guide youth on reporting gender-based violence in schools and provide referrals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More positive understanding of gender issues and attitudes towards gender stereotyping among students, parents and staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support students to reflect on the social construction of gender and think critically about how gender norms can lead to harmful practices Help improve students' knowledge of gender-based violence, and reduce likelihood of violence perpetration Reflect critically on power dynamics and how norms affect behaviours and well-being Includes classroom activities for educators to implement
Potential to scale up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes a programme of 17 sessions under 6 thematic areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum of 7 modules and 22 sessions – embedded in school curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12-week programme of activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 22 criteria for school happiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently establishing partnerships to scale up the project with more primary schools across the country 	
Population	386 boys, 491 girls	4,000 students (2,215 girls and 1,785 boys), 94 educators trained	1,565 students	More than 200 educational professionals	30 primary schools, over 1,000 educators, more than 12,000 children	Pre-implementation: 1,053 boys, 1,344 girls, 2 other, 1 unspecified Post-implementation: 945 boys, 1,235 girls, 2 other, 14 unspecified
Age	Years 7 and 8 (12 to 14 years old)	Years 6 to 8 (12 to 14 years old)	11 to 14 years old	Years 8 and 9 (13 to 14 years old)	Early years and years 1 to 6	12 to 15 years old

Source: Authors, based on the literature review.

Reflections on the approaches of selected programmes

This review found both successes and limitations in keeping boys engaged in education. All programmes shared some common approaches and had culturally adaptable and scalable components. Some programmes explicitly addressed boys' disengagement from education through a focus on gendered dynamics and harmful masculine norms, whereas others approached disengagement more generally without a clear gender lens. For instance, Happy Schools (Portugal) concentrated on improving the overall school climate rather than specifically tackling boys' gendered experiences of disengagement, illustrating the considerable variation in programmes scope.

A key shared feature across most programmes was the inclusion of a structured programme of activities that educators could integrate into classroom practices. These activities addressed topics such as gender norms, violence and health, and often provided practical tools for educators to engage boys (and girls) in learning more effectively. Another shared feature was educator training, which emerged as a central enabler for successful implementation by helping educators recognize and respond to boys' diverse needs. Partnerships with civil society organizations, universities or state institutions were also common, strengthening programmes by providing additional resources, expertise and legitimacy, which were crucial for reaching marginalized boys and ensuring community buy-in.

Key stakeholders play pivotal roles in implementation and success. Educators and school administrators served as the primary facilitators, guiding students through programme materials and modelling the inclusive

principles promoted by each intervention. Policymakers and advisors contributed to initiatives such as Happy Schools, advocating for systemic changes in school policies and supporting the integration of well-being and inclusivity as foundational educational values. VYA 2.0 also provided training for police and healthcare officials, mothers and members of parent-teacher associations, extending programme impact beyond the classroom.

However, several programmes showed gaps in M&E, limiting the ability to assess outcomes and track long-term impacts. Few programmes addressed specific subgroups within the target population, such as boys facing intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g., poverty, disability or ethnicity). Without robust data collection and analysis frameworks, it is difficult to determine which elements of programmes lead to meaningful and lasting improvements in boys' educational engagement. Better monitoring tools and longitudinal studies could help capture these outcomes more effectively, and support the broader application of promising practices.

Overall, while programmes reflected aspects of current research – such as the importance of gender-responsive approaches to boys' disengagement – few fully embraced gender-transformative strategies that challenge restrictive gender norms. The strength of evidence for gender-transformative impact was uneven across programmes, with some lacking clarity on how they intended to shift harmful attitudes around gender. Addressing these gaps by aligning programmes more explicitly with gender-transformative principles could significantly strengthen efforts to re-engage boys in education and promote more equitable learning environments.





4. Perspectives on boys' disengagement from education

Key messages

- Boys disengage and drop out from education due to family financial needs, with higher expectations to contribute economically than to pursue education.
- Societal expectations that expect boys to be resilient and strong, often without supportive structures, contribute to mental health struggles and poor self-esteem among boys.
- Strict teaching methods, rote memorization and a lack of programmes that resonate with boys' needs contribute to disengagement.
- Limited safe spaces for boys and the absence of inclusive activities may also contribute to male disengagement.
- Peer influence contributes to boys' disengagement through activities like substance abuse, gaming and social media distractions, which detract from learning.
- Financial aid programmes that prioritize girls' education may unintentionally create a sense of inequity and resentment, and discourage some boys continuing their studies due to a perceived lack of support.

This chapter presents study participants' perspectives on the factors influencing boys' disengagement from education, drawing on their experience and insights from working on the programmes with educators and learners. Before presenting the emerging findings on boys' disengagement from the primary data, it provides brief contextual background on the countries hosting the programmes: Cambodia, India, Malawi, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Zambia.

Patterns of boys' disengagement from education

In Cambodia, since 2014, female students have outnumbered male students in enrolment and have demonstrated higher academic performance across all general education levels (Chea et al., 2023). In recent years, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has been interested in understanding the root causes of gender disparities in academic performance, and identifying strategies to address boys' underachievement. Guided by successive Education Strategic Plans for 2019–2023 and 2024–2028, policy priorities include expanding access to education, enhancing teaching and learning quality, upgrading school infrastructure and improving teacher training systems.

In Rajasthan state, India, where the GEMS Boys programme has been rolled out to address boys' disengagement in education, data from recent Annual Status of Education Reports show that a slightly greater number of boys aged 11 to 14 are out of school, with this gap widening dramatically for boys aged 15 and above (Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Centre, 2022).

In Malawi, where the latest school census data shows just over 4 percent of primary-age children dropping out in 2023, poverty was the most commonly reported reason – cited more frequently for boys than girls. Family responsibilities (including the need to work) and truancy were also common reasons for boys' dropout. Dropout



rates were higher for boys for all reported reasons, except for marriage and pregnancy. Girls were more likely to drop out at secondary level (MoEST, Malawi, 2024). Among secondary school students, a third of both boys and girls were recorded as vulnerable due to inability to pay school fees. Of over 68,000 bursary applicants in 2024, only 9,354 boys received support compared with 15,251 girls (MoEST, Malawi, 2024).

In Portugal, studies indicate that boys are more likely to leave school early. In 2014, one in three young people who were neither studying nor working had left school early; 40 percent of male students had dropped out, compared to 30 percent of female students (OECD, 2016). More recent data show persistent gender disparities: in 2022, despite an overall decline in dropout rates, the rate of boys' dropout was 7.9 percent compared with 3.9 percent for girls (Fundação José Neves, 2023). Studies also reveal a relationship between early school leaving and later life outcomes, including male involvement in criminal justice settings (Saraiva et al., 2011).

In the United Kingdom, there is a growing concern within education and care systems that narrow and restrictive constructions of masculinity negatively affect boys' and young men's mental and overall health, contributing to

disengagement, poor academic performance, limited participation, and in some cases, active exclusion from education. Boys from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly at risk, with selective academic admissions practices and peer group norms that devalue academic success compounding these challenges (Hamilton et al., 2024). Analysis of 2022–2023 educational attainment in England found that, by the end of compulsory schooling, girls had higher average scores than boys across all headline Department for Education (DfE) measures.

In Zambia, boys are more likely than girls to drop out, particularly at transition points between key examination levels. While primary school enrolment is high for both genders, disparities emerge in secondary education, with boys having higher dropout rates. Contributing factors include financial difficulties, inadequate infrastructure and a lack of qualified educators. Between 2012 and 2017, the share of out-of-school children of primary age increased from 8 to 15.8 percent among boys and from 8.4 to 12.1 percent among girls, with transition rates from primary to lower secondary at 66.1 percent for boys compared with 67.5 percent for girls in 2017 (Universalia, 2019, pp. xx–xxiv).

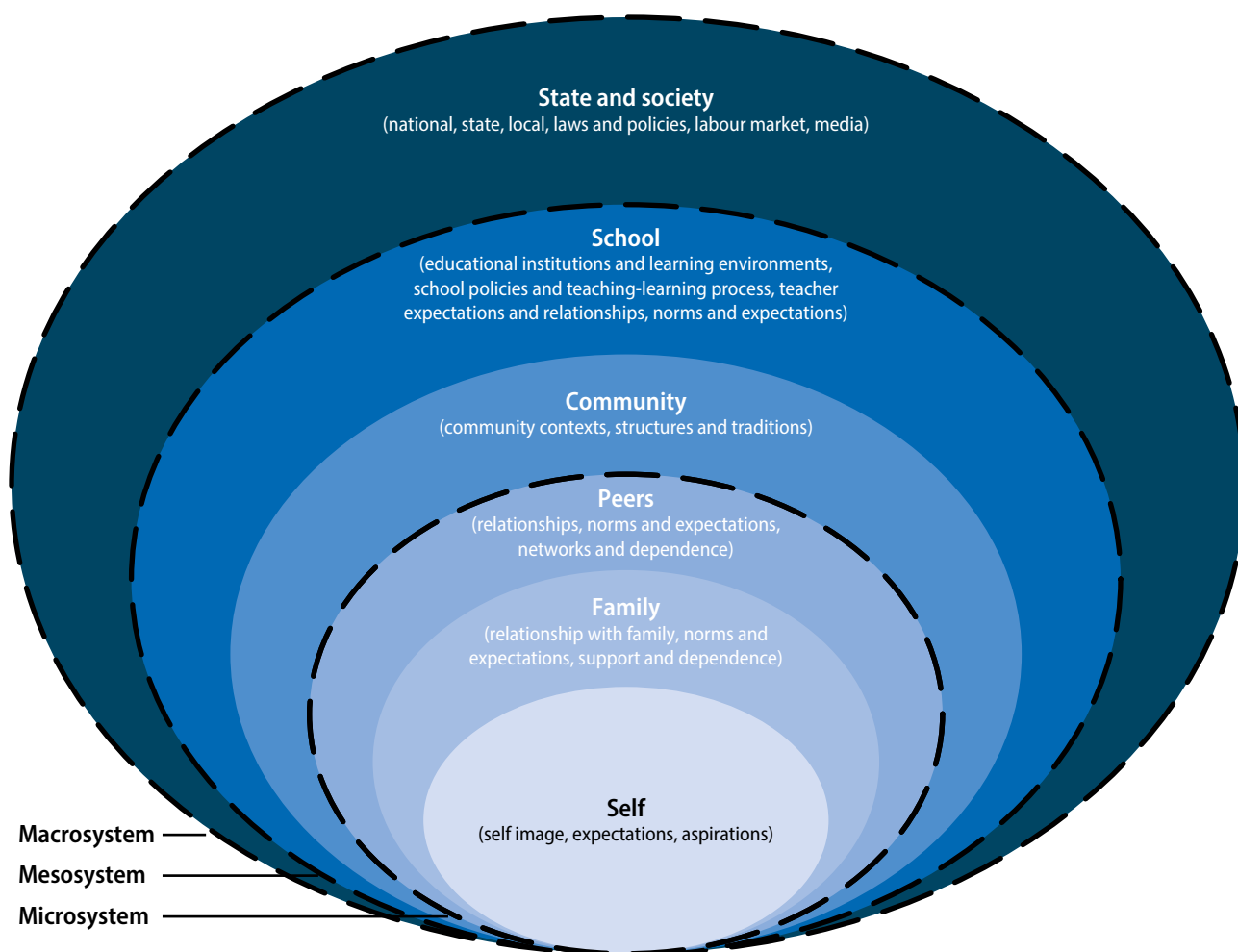
Factors influencing boys' disengagement from education

Participants shared their understandings of the key factors influencing boys' disengagement in their contexts, which can be grouped into socioeconomic factors, social and gender norms, school-related factors, and individual factors and peer group influences (interpersonal factors).⁴ These factors are often interconnected. For example, families' and communities' gender norms are often reflected in school environments. This framework is based on the ecological systems theory approach originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (1995, 2000) which considers the multifaceted and interrelating factors that influence a child's development (**Figure 1**).



⁴ For a discussion of national policy environments, please refer to the mini case studies.

Figure 1. Ecological model



Source: Adapted from UNESCO (2019b).

Socioeconomic factors

In Cambodia, India, Malawi and the United Kingdom, socioeconomic status emerged as a significant factor influencing boys' disengagement from education. In Cambodia, participants at both the school and national levels highlighted that boys from low-income families are often required to participate in economic activities, including migrating to Thailand to support their families. Economic necessity frequently takes precedence over boys' education. Similarly, district coordinators working with the GEMS project in Rajasthan and Jharkhand in India noted that societal and family expectations for boys to be providers often results in boys' drop out. In Malawi, boys are often expected to earn money to support their families through casual labour, farming, fishing and travelling abroad to work, including to South Africa.

Conversely, greater access to money can come with its own constraints, distracting students from learning. A female ICRW staff member (former GEMS Coordinator) in India observed:

// Boys getting money in hand against the work that they were doing ... their whole interest [is] buying a phone, then engaging with all sorts of applications on phone and just spending time among peers.

In Cambodia, participants noted that more affluent families, preoccupied with business activities, often provide smartphones to their sons to keep them occupied and entertained, sometimes at the expense of monitoring their educational needs and academic performance. At the same time, the widespread presence of private tutoring in schools has created a competitive

environment, limiting learning opportunities for students whose families cannot afford the fees, and contributing to reduced motivation and self-esteem among boys.

In Malawi, financial and food insecurity is widespread, contributing to high absenteeism and dropout rates among boys whose families cannot cover school costs, compounded by difficulties in accessing bursaries and welfare programmes. The historical, sustained focus on girls' education by government and civil society, along with a perceived lack of support for boys – many of whom face observable disadvantage – has led to disengagement and provoked resentment, including towards girls (Moleni, 2008). During interviews and workshops, several participants argued that financial support for schooling is inequitable, often ignoring boys' vulnerabilities. As one male VYA 2.0 educator in Malawi explained:

// Organizations are focusing on girls by encouraging them that they should work hard in their studies, even though they are coming from poor households, and assuring them that they will be supported. Such kind of encouragement is not there for boys, and looking at their families' financial struggles, they were not motivated to work hard in their studies because there is no hope ... being around their siblings who have dropped out of due to lack of school fees was a further discouragement.

Social and gender norms

During interviews and workshops in Malawi and the United Kingdom, participants spoke of the impact of the gendered expectations of society, communities and peer groups shape boys' self-perceptions, and what it means to be a boy or young man, and how these, in turn, influence their behaviour, aspirations and, directly or indirectly, their engagement with education. Such expectations are often linked to pervasive social norms and views of masculinity. Participants noted that boys are often expected to be dominant, strong and resilient but, in reality, may feel powerless, weak and unsure of themselves. This tension can contribute to low self-esteem, poor mental health and/or a reinforcement of dominant masculine norms through unhealthy and risk-taking behaviour. Zambian participants noted increased levels of unhealthy practices, such as alcohol and drug abuse.

In Malawi, participants linked expectations of resilience to a perceived lack of support for boys' education. For example, boys are expected to walk long distances

He noted that these dynamics often led to boys' low self-esteem, frustration and disruptive behaviour, and violence against girls. Participants in Zambia similarly emphasized that while NGOs have made substantial efforts to address the barriers faced by girls in education, boys' disengagement has often been overlooked.

In the United Kingdom, workshop participants highlighted the impact of socioeconomic inequalities on educational engagement, particularly on boys' and youth who receive free school meals. Some low-income, working-class communities face the dual challenge of limited educational opportunities and low aspirations, underpinned by intergenerational trauma. A United Kingdom researcher cautioned that labelling these groups as educational 'underachievers' risks perpetuating a deficit discourse, which emphasizes perceived shortcomings, failures and problems rather than of their strengths, resilience or the broader social contexts they face. Another researcher noted the breakdown of traditional success narratives in working-class communities, citing social media influencers who promote 'shortcuts' over hard work, which can negatively affect boys' motivation to engage academically.

to school, swim across flooded rivers and even withstand various forms of physical punishment. These perceptions reinforce the idea that education programmes disproportionately benefit girls (**Chapter 5**) while downplaying boys' vulnerabilities. One participant described a programme that provided girls with bicycles to get to school, whereas boys were expected to walk. Another suggested that downplaying the vulnerability of boys is contributing to higher rates of suicide among boys. Participants in India noted that the lack of acknowledgement of boys' vulnerabilities in educational settings has led to limited support or understanding of their emotional needs.

In the United Kingdom, interviewees described how patriarchal norms negatively impact boys, particularly those from lower socioeconomic, working-class backgrounds. They argued that such boys can feel constrained by a fixed idea of masculinity, and pressured to conform to traditional ideals of being dominant, strong

and uninterested in academic success. For those who do not fit this mould, this conflict can create feelings of inadequacy and a rejection of academic subjects, as they fear judgement from their peers. Academic interests can be stigmatized as 'unmanly', deterring boys from fully engaging in subjects they enjoy. One male participant, who organizes workshops with boys struggling at school, described boys' views of what it means to be a man:

“ ... and it's always the same. They say things like, you know, be dominant, be strong, hook up with loads of girls, be muscular. Don't do well in school. It's always the same, this idea that it's not masculine to be academically aspirational.

“ The sad irony is that a lot [of boys] are really interested in some of their academic studies. So, for example, when I was an English teacher, there were times that I knew this boy right here was loving Shakespeare or loving

this poem, but he couldn't show it ... He was scared to show it because he was fearful of the judgement of all the other boys in the room.

– Male workshop practitioner, United Kingdom

A United Kingdom researcher who works with working-class boys argued that the focus should shift from framing these boys as 'failing' to acknowledging that the educational system itself is failing boys, and emphasized the importance of supporting boys to redefine masculinity in a healthy, self-reflective way that includes self-care and well-being. She proposed that while it is important to counteract the toxic influence of social media's misogynist 'manfluencers'⁵, programmes working to tackle harmful gender norms and behaviours need to avoid pathologizing boys and young men and treating them like future perpetrators. Others noted that applying the term 'toxic masculinity'⁶ can leave boys feeling excluded and unlikely to engage.

School-related factors

The school environment and lack of focused support can negatively impact boys' engagement. In Cambodia, strict teaching methods and limited educator support can create a hostile learning environment, discouraging students from participating actively. In India, a strong emphasis on rote memorization in some schools was reported to contribute to students' disinterest in learning. In Malawi, male educators described how boys may attend school but remain mentally disengaged, appear distracted, and fail to participate in classroom activities, 'silently excluding' themselves (Gilmour and Soudien, 2009). Educators attributed this partly to the lack of programmes and activities that support and inspire boys. During the workshop in Malawi, participants noted that government primary schools have community-led Mother Support Groups, which play a vital role in supporting girls' welfare and engagement, and suggested similar support for boys. A guidance teacher in Zambia highlighted the need for schools to have clubs and safe spaces for boys.

In the United Kingdom, participants noted that schools rarely provide safe spaces for boys to explore their identities and discuss sensitive topics, and staff may feel ill-equipped to address mental health and emotional well-

being – critical for boys' development. Experts described how schools are sometimes perceived as less masculine spaces, contributing to a poor sense of belonging for boys. The 'hidden curriculum' was highlighted as reinforcing gender stereotypes. One participant explained that boys were often seen as troublesome, underperforming, lacking concentration and focus, and that when boys advocated for themselves, this was often read as delinquent behaviour. Structural factors such as limited support for learners with special needs and neurodiversity, high workloads and a rigid curriculum further prevent educators from being able to focus on boys' disengagement.

In Portugal, the Happy Schools framework is designed to be flexible and adaptable to school contexts, offering potential to support boys' engagement, if identified as a concern. Although not explicitly targeting boys, research by the implementing team in Portugal identified five core elements contributing to boys' happiness in school: access to study materials and computers, study visits, nutritious food, outdoor classes and effective discipline. The latter was seen as particularly important for addressing bullying, which a female educator noted is often directed at ethnic and sexual minorities.

5 'Manfluencers' are male influencers who use their platforms on the web and through social media to 're-stabilise masculine hegemony through a reassertion of traditional, patriarchal masculine norms' (Westcott et al., 2023, p. 168).

6 'Toxic masculinity' refers to the cultures of strict adherence to traditional gender norms (also described as 'hegemonic') and the impact that this has on men and boys. Particular focus is placed on the social and health impacts that elements such of violence and emotional restraint have on men and boys in particular.

Similarly, participants in Malawi and Zambia emphasized that school violence and bullying is a key cause for concern, with boys both as perpetrators and victims. In India, participants noted that, despite being banned, corporal punishment remains a risk for boys. Participants described educators' stereotypical perceptions of boys as unruly, troublesome and difficult to manage often underpin the sustained use of corporal punishment on boys. One participant observed that physical punishment and other forms of violence and discrimination are disproportionately directed at children from marginalized and lower caste groups, and that schools themselves perpetuate and reinforce gender norms and stereotypes that contribute to boys' disengagement.

In the United Kingdom, where a growing network of organizations and researchers are focusing on boys'

disengagement, participants were vocal about the need to address harmful norms and stereotypes and affirm positive masculine identities, including in schools. Implementing staff from Lifting Limits noted how boys and girls are subject from a young age to gendered home and learning environments and internalize societal expectations that influence their interests, play patterns and aspirations over time.

“ [In schools] despite promoting equity, stereotypes such as ‘girls read, boys don’t’ and ‘boys are naturally good at math’ continue to shape children’s self-perceptions from an early age.

– Female staff member, United Kingdom

Individual and interpersonal factors

Study participants in Cambodia, India, Malawi and Zambia all described negative influences from peers and the broader community as playing a role in boys' disengagement. Distractions like alcohol, drugs, video screenings and social media were all identified as contributing to boys' absence from school. In Cambodia, the prevalence of materialism and consumerism was said to divert boys' attention from education and create unrealistic expectations. Participants also underscored that excessive gaming and exposure to harmful content online could lead to a decline in boys' academic performance and behaviour. In Malawi, drinking and smoking were reported by study participants to be particularly prevalent in urban settings.

Low achievement is often a precursor to more permanent forms of disengagement, such as dropout, compounded by irregular and intermittent school attendance (Hunt, 2008). In Cambodia, participants observed a decline in focus and interest in studies, particularly as boys entered secondary education. Boys with a history of poor academic performance were more likely to experience a loss of motivation and confidence. In Malawi, boys' irregular attendance at school was often linked to a decline in interest in education, which was seen as having limited relevance to many adolescent boys' needs and lived experiences. Boys' disengagement also extends to the very educational programmes that address gender norms and improve gender equality in schools – programmes resisted by boys because they are equated with 'girls' issues'.





5. Promising strategies

Key messages

- The most effective strategies are embedded in whole-school approaches.
- Flexibility and responsiveness in programme design is important to its success.
- Interactivity is a key component of engaging sessions.
- Built-in opportunities for reflection are key to helping participants deepen their understanding and internalize the issues discussed.
- Facilitators, especially educators, must receive thorough training and ongoing support to deliver programmes confidently and effectively.
- Partnership is crucial to the efficient and effective implementation of programmes.
- Effective leadership at the policy, community and school levels is crucial for driving educational reform and promoting gender equality.
- Policy support helps create an enabling environment for programme implementation and provides a platform for programme activities.
- Financial constraints can undermine programme effectiveness and reach.
- Short-term programmes are unlikely to be gender-transformative.

Analysing participants' responses, this section outlines the key elements of gender-transformative strategies for addressing boys' disengagement from education, keeping boys engaged in school and learning, and promoting gender-equitable attitudes, values and behaviours. It considers successful elements of strategies, formats, target groups, implementers and enabling and impeding factors.

Successful elements of strategies

Whole-school approaches

The most common element of strategies to address boys' disengagement from education involved programmes embedded within a whole-school approach, delivered through structured activities for children and young people. Programme duration varied, from a 12-week programme, such as VYA 2.0, in Malawi to a two-year programme, like GEMS in India. Most programmes adopted a phased approach, focusing on thematic content and delivering participatory sessions that enabled learners to engage with topics in depth.

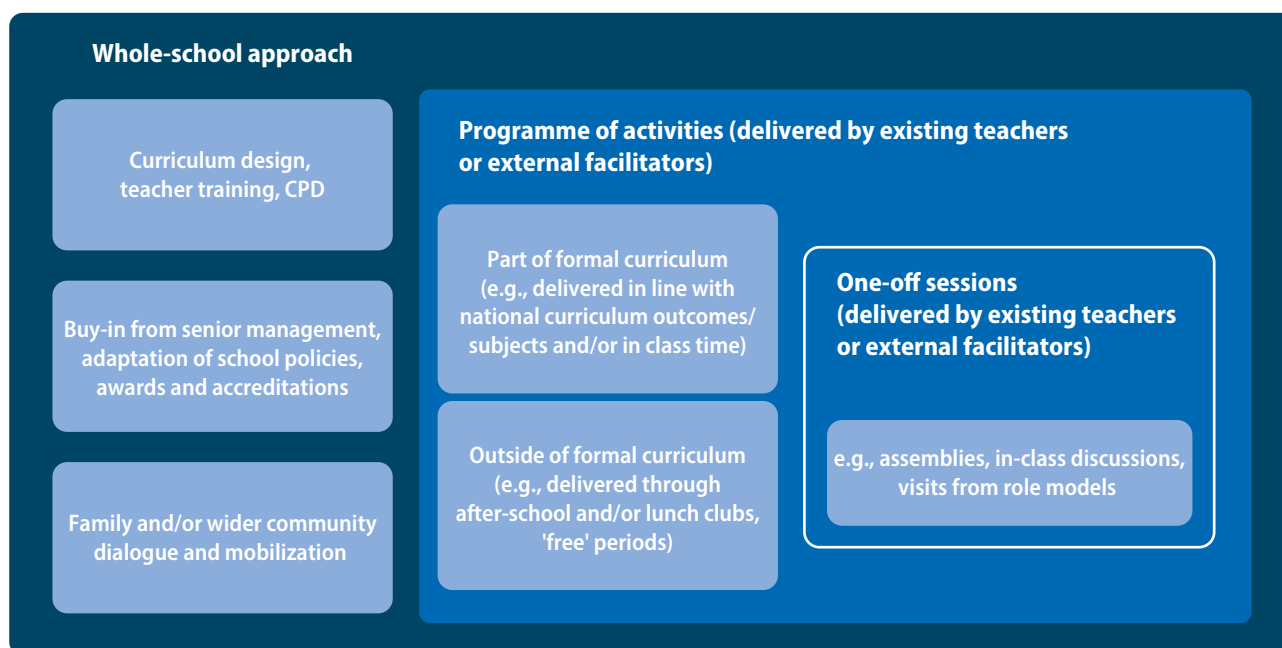
Participants widely regarded whole-school approaches as the best way to deliver gender-transformative programmes in educational contexts, as they signal a wider commitment to gender equality to both educators

and learners (**Figure 2**). Rather than focusing on isolated components, these approaches engage the entire school ecosystem, working with students, teachers and the broader community to achieve change:

“ The idea is really to improve learning outcomes, but in order to improve learning outcomes, we cannot be just focusing on the academics. We need to be focusing on the whole child. We need to be focusing on the whole school, and there needs to be a system-level effort.

– Female NGO staff, Portugal

Figure 2. Whole-school approaches to gender-transformative programme delivery



Source: Authors.

Key elements of whole-school approaches typically include policies, teacher training, pedagogical practices, learning environments, and collaboration with parents and caregivers (Marcus et al., 2024; Plan International et al., 2021). In practice, this requires interventions at multiple levels, from shaping overarching school culture to implementing specific activities. While one-off activities such as assemblies and visiting role models can raise awareness, they have limited long-term impact when implemented in isolation.

At a strategic level, whole-school approaches involve engagement and support from senior management, modifications to school policy where necessary, sustained resourcing and investment in continuing professional development (CPD) for educators, support staff and administrators, and adaptations and reflections on curriculum design. Auditing existing resources and policies is also central to this approach, as demonstrated by pilot schools in the Lifting Limits (United Kingdom) intervention. This participant further outlined Lifting Limits' whole-school approach:

“ ... gender equality work is our focus. And it's throughout the school, you know it's in the playground. It's in the lessons. It's in the activities. So, I think the practical support we

give to schools is we show them ways that it can be weaved into everything. So, this doesn't just need to be a discussion that's held in circle time ... there's stuff that we can do in maths, there's things we can do in science. That's what we're aiming for, that holistic approach.

– Female implementer, United Kingdom

Success in delivering a programme at a whole-school level requires having a significant degree of flexibility in the design and application of the initiative, so that it can be adapted and tailored to the needs of the wider community. Another study participant explained:

“ The scenarios that we use and the discussions that we encourage are designed to be relevant for and open to children of all genders and we think that in different ways, gender norms and gender stereotypes impact on all children. So, in that sense, we've tried to, in a way, sort of distance ourselves, maybe that's not quite the right word, but to move beyond a focus on boys.

– Male implementer, United Kingdom

Effective implementation of activities

Participants explained that successful programmes were delivered through a series of activities, implemented either as delivered standalone interventions or as part of a whole school approach. Materials for pre-designed programmes were usually designed by external organizations and delivered by educators or external facilitators. In some cases, they were co-created with educators. Depending on the length of the intervention (which varied considerably – see **Chapter 3**), a thematic or phased approach was taken. However, even where programmes were not integrated into the curriculum, they did not need to feel distinct or 'separate' from wider curriculum-based learning outcomes, as explained by a participant from Zambia:

“ We find that this programme is integrated at every aspect of learning. So, on our timetable, we don't really indicate there to say, this will be a period for connecting with respect, or at this point, the teacher will be teaching this programme. But then, in the lesson planning, every teacher knows to say, there should be an

aspect of 'connects with respect'. At the time that the teacher is interacting with the learners, the teacher is engaging with the learners, there should be an aspect of connecting with respect. So, that is the strategy that we are taking.

– Female implementer, Zambia

Within a whole-school approach, a spiral approach to the curriculum was specifically discussed as a good practice, enabling learners to revisit key concepts over time:

“ ... it's about having that spiral curriculum. So, you might start something maybe in year seven or year eight and then you spiral it up. So, you can talk to the kids in year seven about forced marriage, but then you will make it more complex and more intricate by the time that they're in year nine and beyond.

– Female educator, United Kingdom

Participants identified a wide range of participatory activities to support engagement and learning, including:

- Group discussions
- Study clubs
- Role-playing
- Poster presentations
- Debates
- Visualizing
- Workshops
- Diary writing
- Discussion cards
- Assemblies
- Games
- Creative outputs (e.g., podcasts, poetry)
- Guest visitors (e.g., role models)

Typically, the programme of activities approach was delivered by members of the teaching team within school hours to ensure maximum engagement, although this was not always possible:

// ... it's usually done after their normal learning Zambian time or government programme or Ministry of Education time. When they are done learning, that's when we meet them so that we don't disturb the school programme. The meetings are not daily. We choose days when the school calendar is free. There are a lot of activities happening.

– Female educator, Zambia

Programme implementers

Who best delivers the intervention? There was no clear answer to this question and divergent views. Some participants believed that educators are the best placed to deliver a gender-transformative curriculum as they have a previously established and ongoing relationship to the student cohort.

Others, however, suggested that the novelty and safety of an external facilitator can increase engagement and openness. Where external facilitators are used, participants emphasized that they should be trusted individuals with strong connection to the community being served. In these cases, engagement was rather with

Practical considerations were also important in supporting participation. For example, a participant from Malawi explained that providing food was a good way of ensuring good attendance and engagement in the session:

// I would say that availability of the food we provided to the children was important because it is not easy to contain a child who is hungry, and it prevented absenteeism.

– Male implementer, Malawi

Participants also emphasised that *how* programmes were delivered was often more important than *what* content was included. Valuing young people's voices and perspectives, creating safe and non-judgemental spaces, and ensuring critical reflection were seen as key to sustained engagement with the programme:

// The how is far more important than the what in all this ... it's about valuing their voices, their experiences, a clear demonstration that you care, that you're interested. That you want to understand their views and their perceptions in a non-judgmental way, that you will have critical conversations that will encourage critical reflection in those spaces. But those spaces aren't there to shame to judge, to tell you that you are wrong. And when those conditions are fostered, then that's how behaviours or minds can change. You know, if those conditions aren't there, then there's resistance. There's straight away these warning signs and these triggers.

– Male programme leader, United Kingdom

community-based stakeholders such as chiefs, religious leaders and duty bearers who had a vested interest in the success of gender-transformative programmes. Who should deliver the intervention should be pilot tested as part of any initiative.

// Relationships are key and trust and rapport is absolutely key and where there has been time and capacity to do that well, the outcomes have been significant and where there hasn't been time and capacity to do that well, a lot less so.

– Male programme leader, United Kingdom

Identifying and engaging with target groups

Achieving a whole-school 'wider ecosystem' approach to the delivery of an intervention requires sustained commitment to respecting and elevating the voices and perspectives of young people. This was found to be a significant opportunity when working with boys and young men, particularly those from low-income and marginalized backgrounds (including racially and/or ethnically minoritized groups and young people with disabilities).

However, engaging with some groups presents additional challenges. Young people who are home-schooled or permanently outside of formal education systems were identified as hard to reach, given that all case study programmes operate within school contexts. Reaching these groups would require alternative approaches to engagement and partnerships with relevant stakeholders.

Participants mentioned that sensitivity is key when engaging with marginalized groups because, as one male programme leader (United Kingdom) explained, *'ill thought-out assumptions go in and do more harm than good, especially with working class young people.'*

This can be seen in the context of GEMS (India) where students' disengagement, intentionally or unintentionally, was sometimes attributed to educators' behaviours, including through the reinforcement of caste-based bias and other forms of undermining practices contributing to exclusion. Participants suggested that sensitivity training could help minimize these consequences, and enable educators to acknowledge and work constructively with difference, thereby creating opportunities for engagement.



Identifying and engaging key stakeholders was seen as highly context-dependent, varying by region and cultural context. Across the regions explored in this study, primary caregivers such as parents and guardians were seen to be crucial to the holistic success of the intervention.

For example, primary caregivers were explicitly involved in the LSEP (Cambodia), trained and visited by facilitators, leading to wider benefits:

“ Parents usually divided their roles and responsibilities based on wife and husband duties but after learning about gender at the meeting, they understand more about it ...

They always said, 'men should not cry'. I explain to them that as a human regardless of gender, all have tears. What if you try to stop us from crying, how would we feel? Then, many male parents realized that they could also cry. Before, they [the father figure] were afraid that people would say that they were cowards for crying because they are the head of the family. Now, they know that when they face a problem, they can discuss it with their partners.

– Female facilitator, Cambodia

Similarly, in the GEMS programme (India), young people produced diaries that they could take home to share their understandings with their parents. In Malawi and Zambia, the inclusion of community chiefs can aid the overarching success:

“ ... if the chiefs are involved, they may put by-laws to control their subjects if they were doing some abuses like stopping children from attending school.

– Female implementer, Malawi

Enabling factors

In addition to key strategies and activities that form the core of the implemented programmes and intervention models, study participants were asked what makes a supportive enabling environment for implementation.

Engagement with key stakeholders

Engagement with key stakeholders was described as a crucial enabling factor. In Malawi and Zambia, participants noted a supportive policy environment. In Zambia, explicit endorsement from the Ministry of Education facilitated the smooth implementation of the CwR programme. One of the CwR master trainers explained how the Re-entry in School policy, previously focused only on girls, now extends to boys who may have left school 'as a result of drug abuse or other reasons ... [and] then want to come back'. The success of this wider policy focus is yet to be evaluated.

In the United Kingdom, Lifting Limits aligned its work with current education policies, including safeguarding regulations and the requirements of the inspection service, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), helping schools to challenge stereotypes. Schools participating in the programme also benefited from collaboration with Equimundo's Global Boyhood Initiative, sharing best practices. A school representative from the United Kingdom emphasized that '*schools love to hear what other schools have done and they love networking with each other.*'

In the United Kingdom, the emphasis on building trust and rapport among stakeholders proved crucial for achieving positive outcomes. A male programme implementer highlighted that, '*Relationships are key and trust and rapport are absolutely key.*' A United Kingdom programme working directly with boys struggling at school was boosted by strong partnerships with universities and youth organizations, ensuring that its work remained evidence-based and relevant:

// Connecting to academics and thought leaders ... is very important for us to be evidence-based and research-informed.

– Male programme director, United Kingdom

Similarly, in Portugal, partnerships between schools, the Open University, and the City Council supported resource provision and community engagement, particularly for integrating migrant students.

In India, ICRW persistently engaged with the government apparatus and training institutions at block, district and state levels to organize teacher training and work in public schools. ICRW also partnered with grassroots organizations to gain insights into local contexts and effectively implement GEMS. These local organizations served as key stakeholders, providing vital context-specific information and monitoring the programme's implementation. The partnerships helped to build local capacity and foster ownership of gender-transformative initiatives within the community.

In Malawi, the VYA 2.0 programme received support from a wide range of stakeholders, including the Malawi Police and local hospitals enhancing the programme's response to young people affected by gender-based violence. A strong collaboration with educators helped also to create a welcoming environment and build trust with students. A female facilitator highlighted this synergy, stating:

// At first we used the teachers because they have their own way to engage students ... to assure them that we are not there to say some bad things.

This strategy contributed to open discussions with facilitators, crucial for the programme's success.

Capacity building

Capacity building for implementers, particularly educators, was key to programme success. In the United Kingdom, Lifting Limits prioritises CPD for educators and training for all school staff, supported by external experts from organizations like the not-for-profit Spring Impact organization. A male programme implementer spoke of the need for 'constant CPD, constantly have to update your knowledge, especially when it comes to the digital world.'

In Portugal, the Ministry's accreditation of the Happy Schools training course allowed school leaders to financially support educators' CPD through a 52-hour online course. A male participant from the Open University highlighted how capacity building can be delivered with minimal resources through the accessibility of technology: 'Nowadays you have a cell phone that films anyone ... you don't need much'.

In India, intensive teacher training with formal and informal follow-up support, pre- and post-test evaluations, and session reflections helped build capacity and provide backstopping support. Capacity development of partner organizations and government personnel were crucial for the smooth implementation of the programme and its positive impact.

Across multiple contexts (Cambodia, India, Malawi and the United Kingdom), opportunities for self-reflection among educators and facilitators to confront personal biases and resistance, build understanding and enhance capacity:

“ Unless you are doing self-reflection with the teachers, you won't be able to change their mindset.

– Male block coordinator, India

School-level leadership

Strong leadership at the school level enabled programme success. In the United Kingdom, Gender Champions helped roll out the Lifting Limits programme in schools by facilitating activities and dialogue. In Portugal, the passionate involvement of a specific educator who championed the project illustrated the impact of individual leadership within schools.

In India, the programme was designed to prepare educators as leaders in challenging harmful gender norms and masculinities, enabling them to play a gender-transformative role. Educators underwent intensive training and led the children's sessions. Strong leadership from ICRW at all levels, from educational block level to national level,⁷ provided an enabling environment for educators, partners and other stakeholders to lead their respective roles.

Robust M&E

Participants across programmes spoke of the importance of robust M&E. The Cambodia Development Resource Institute's (CDRI) report on LSEP (Cambodia) highlights

a comprehensive, mixed methods monitoring and evaluation design (**Box 4**).

Box 4. Room to Read's LSEP M&E framework (Cambodia)

Room to Read employs a robust M&E framework for LSEP project implementation. Typically, the team develops a list of learning agendas or questions to gather insights from the pilot. A comprehensive evaluation plan was created to address these questions, encompassing baseline, midline and end-line assessments. These evaluations also focus on understanding stakeholders' experiences, measuring programme outcomes and analysing the relationships between these factors.

Room to Read's M&E team has implemented both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the evaluation. Quantitative studies, known as Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) studies, employ surveys to measure changes in knowledge, attitudes and practice. Qualitative studies, conducted internally or externally, provide deeper insights into the experiences of students, educators and programme staff. The qualitative strand can take the form of group discussions and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the programme's implementation and impact.

Source: Adapted from Bun et al., 2025, p. 5.

⁷ Educational Blocks refer to geographical areas within districts, specifically used for administrative and data collection purposes.

In Malawi, a robust reporting system allowed lead facilitators to provide daily updates to VYA 2.0 project coordinators, facilitating continuous improvement. A male facilitator noted, *'As lead facilitators, we were supposed to report about the activities ... and share the reports with other stakeholders'*, which fostered adaptability and effective coordination. In Portugal, despite the short duration of the intervention which limited long-term evaluations, improvements in school engagement

and positive behavioural changes among students were observed. These insights collectively underscored that effective M&E not only tracked progress but also enhanced the overall success of the programme. In India, M&E was facilitated through a multilayered monitoring mechanism, which enabled the programme staff to respond immediately to the confusion and concerns raised by the nodal educators, who are the designated educators responsible for conducting the sessions.

Ongoing consultation with primary stakeholders

Continuous consultation with stakeholders was one of the major enabling factors in almost all the programmes reviewed. For example, in GEMS, the first step was school profiling and a community-based baseline survey in project sites in India. In this survey, adolescent boys' and girls' perspectives, knowledge and attitudes about gender were collected. Based on the findings, boys and girls were continuously engaged in discussions and activities

using a gender-transformative approach. Similar efforts were made in Portugal, despite a heavy workload for both educators and students. Direct engagement with caregivers in LSEP (Cambodia) and direct and indirect engagement with families through students' diaries and annual school functions in GEMS ensured continuous engagement with both students and those who influence them.

System-wide resourcing

The example of India showed that study participants believed that resourcing across the system was important to the success of the intervention. Study participants agreed that GEMS was equipped with adequate and appropriate human resources and financial support. Human resources such as field facilitators, Block coordinators, District coordinators and State-

level coordinators were positioned to oversee the implementation of the activities, including research, monitoring and evaluation, facilitating teacher training, and connecting with government entities at their respective levels. Multiple funding agencies financed the GEMS intervention, thereby avoiding pressure on only one funder.

Challenging factors

Overloaded curriculum and assessment

A common challenge across all programmes was the pressure of overloaded curriculum and examination- and results-oriented teaching and learning. Content-heavy curricula and the pressure to improve academic outcomes left little room for teaching essential soft skills like critical thinking, negotiation and emotional intelligence.

In Cambodia, educators reported that examination-focused curriculum limited opportunities for extracurricular personal development work, leaving life

skills and gender-transformative work often to be sidelined. Similarly, a programme coordinator from Portugal stated:

“ If your policy frameworks are, like, super high stakes exam focused, and don't pay their teachers enough ... with all of that a happy school will be impossible.

– Female programme coordinator, Portugal

Resource constraints

Resource (human, physical, material, capacity and financial) constraints were a concern in all the programmes except GEMS (India). A Cambodian school director associated with LSEP explained the impact of resource constraints on the delivery of the programme within the wider school context:

“ There are usually a lot of students per class, up to 50. If the teacher/facilitator has 45 or 60 minutes, they already spent about 15 minutes moving the desks outside the classroom or getting students into groups and getting ready for the discussion ... Some sessions or topics cannot be finished in one session as planned but need to extend to another session.

– Male school director, Cambodia

Shortages of qualified facilitators and resistance from some educators to take on additional responsibilities further constrained delivery.

In Malawi, financial constraints affected staff and educators, with rural communities and other stakeholders requesting allowances. A facilitator from Zambia noted that financial constraints affected nearly every aspect of the programme, from teaching materials to student learning, while a participant from Portugal also mentioned budgetary constraints in schools.

Resistance

Some resistance emerged around gender-related programming, particularly in Malawi and Zambia, where there has been a sustained focus on girls' education.

“ Generally, in Zambia, boys' disengagement is not preached as we preach about girls ... A gap has been created where we have a lot of girls who are educated, and what will happen? That is already a future problem. So, with CwR you tackle both boys and girls because everyone is supposed to be in school.

– Female teacher, Zambia

In Malawi, participants reported some challenges in engaging boys in the programme, particularly during its early stages. Some boys who attended sessions received negative feedback from their peers, which discouraged others from participating:

Human resource constraints were also reported across different contexts. Interviewees from India and Portugal specifically raised the issue of teacher shortage. In Zambia, some participants noted that the CwR programme had a limited number of sufficiently trained educators. Similar concerns were raised in Malawi. In the United Kingdom, challenges included competing programmes, time conflicts and staff turnover. Primary school senior leaders and educators showed an interest in the area, but could not progress, lacking in capacity and financial resources. Participants in the United Kingdom highlighted that a lack of resources to build relevant knowledge and expertise were also lacking, making it challenging to discuss how masculinity impacts feminist goals without the necessary intellectual and theoretical resources.

Physical resources were also a constraint. In Malawi, one male educator noted a lack of adequate spaces, sharing:

“ Teacher might take the boys to have an activity in the hall but you end up realizing that the hall is occupied by girls learning.

While this may be a physical resource constraint, it could also be a gap in design and planning. In India, the importance of digital resources was highlighted, as during evaluation, impact was seen to be higher in control blocks where boys had greater technological access and exposure compared to in intervention blocks.

“ Boys were not taking part. They would show up one day and fail to show up on another, so this hindered the progress in terms of the things that we were supposed to teach them. When we asked then why they were not showing up, they told us that their friends were laughing at them or that they went to play football or that they were no longer interested to do things regarded as for girls.

– Female VYA 2.0 facilitator, Malawi

Community perceptions and negative impressions of NGOs also created some barriers initially in Malawi and Zambia. In Zambia, the CwR curriculum encountered resistance from parents and others who had learned about the programme on social media. Community

members were concerned that their children were learning about sex in school:

“ Culturally, here at some point we had the challenges – social challenges coming from the community and it was all over, even on social media. The community thought the tools are mainly focused on teaching the learners about sex. That does not go well. It was an issue that it went to the Parliament until it was resolved and clarified. Each time, people will see you and tell these are people teaching about sex in the schools.

– Female master trainer, Zambia

In India, deeply embedded gender stereotypes and/or traditional masculine norms held by educators, parents and bureaucrats posed an initial challenge alongside cultural pride. A male district coordinator stated:

“ The biggest challenge here was the patriarchal system that was there in everyone's vein, whether teachers or government people.

In the United Kingdom, resistance was more pronounced, as the issues addressed by the programme were already the subject of intense public debate. Gender is a contentious issue in the United Kingdom culture wars, especially online. Competing narratives from social media influencers – particularly those followed by young people, especially boys – posed a threat to the programme by promoting opposing views on gender norms and

masculinity. As a result, schools were hesitant to engage with these topics for fear of parental backlash as one Lifting Limits implementer explains:

“ ... we've had this tied in with a number of different things like relationship and sex education. That has been a bit wobbly over the past few years, with very polarizing debates and arguments around transgender issues, for example.

– Female implementer, United Kingdom

Some parents also expressed concern about gender-transformative programmes might make their sons 'soft', reflecting broader resistance to challenging traditional views of masculinity. There was also a risk of positioning boys as the problem, a concern raised in India and the United Kingdom:

“ ... unintentionally, they would start feeling as if they are being blamed for all the misery or the discrimination that girls are experiencing.

– Female implementer, United Kingdom

This illustrates some resistance to interventions focusing on boys' needs, with some parents interpreting this as a deficit model and arguing that there is nothing wrong with boys. There is a risk that, if not carefully framed, discussions of the impact of harmful masculine norms on gender relations may make boys feel that they are the problem, rather than individuals also constrained by restrictive gender expectations.



A group of diverse students in school uniforms are shown in a classroom setting, cheering enthusiastically with their hands raised. The students are wearing white shirts and dark ties or vests. The background features a yellow poster and a bulletin board. The overall atmosphere is one of excitement and achievement.

6. Outcomes, measures and evidence of success

Key messages

- Formal measurement varied across programmes, with the most robust mechanisms evident in GEMS and LSEP, and additional measurement initiatives identified in GEMS, Happy Schools and Taking Boys Seriously programmes.
- Implementers wanted to see clear, robust and measured impacts of the programme; however, such measurement was absent or limited in most cases.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests shifts in boys' attitudes and behaviours across all programmes examined, though these changes were uneven and often dependent on external factors beyond the intervention.
- Longer engagement in gender-transformative interventions was associated with more enduring positive attitudinal and behavioural changes.
- Emotional growth was recognized as a measure of success across all programmes.
- Ongoing feedback mechanisms and technical backstopping to support programme implementers, including educators and facilitators, are likely to contribute to short- and long-term impact.

This chapter discusses the evidence, perceived outcomes, and impacts of the programmes reviewed, and considers the extent to which they address gender norms and expectations, including restrictive and harmful masculinities, to keep boys engaged in school and promote gender-equitable attitudes, values and behaviours among boys and other key stakeholders. Study participants were also asked how they understand and measure success in their respective programmes.

As identified in the desk review (**Table 3**), the programmes studied varied considerably in their aims and approaches

to addressing boys' disengagement and promoting gender-equitable attitudes and values. As a result, definitions and measures of 'success' also varied across programmes. Many defined success as positive attitudinal change among both students and educators. Qualitative findings from the desk review and interviews further highlight a range of behavioural changes associated with programme participation. Key insights from programmes promoting gender-equitable attitudes and practices are presented in **Table 5**.

Documented evidence of success

The desk review highlighted several previously reported outcomes within the relevant programme documentation (see also **Chapter 3**).

LSEP (Cambodia)

Reported outcomes include increased knowledge of gender dynamics and conflict resolution among boys, with many demonstrating better communication skills and empathy towards peers. Although there is no quantitative evidence on outcomes, qualitative data

demonstrate significant shifts in attitudes and behaviours. Participants reported greater awareness of gender stereotypes, increased willingness to challenge harmful norms, and improved relationships between boys and girls (Jeong et al., 2023). However, although boys and girls were able to discuss what they learned, they did not generally seem to internalize this knowledge in their daily lives. Teachers and facilitators nonetheless observed a more inclusive and respectful school environment, with students engaging in more constructive discussions around gender equality and violence prevention.

GEMS (India)

According to an independent evaluation, students showed a significant positive shift in attitudes toward gender and violence. After two years of programme implementation, boys demonstrated more equitable views of gender roles, and educators reported fewer

gender-related conflicts and more collaborative classrooms interactions. Evidence of outcomes include an improvement of attitudes toward gender equality, including increased support among boys for girls' higher education (from 12 to 28 percent), alongside declines



in support for corporal punishment (by 9.5 percentage points) and peer-based violence (from 29 percent to 11.8 percent). These attitudinal shifts suggest the programme's potential to influence broader societal norms.

VYA 2.0 (Malawi)

The programme fostered greater student engagement and self-confidence, with participants showing a heightened willingness to address personal challenges and discuss sensitive topics such as gender roles and conflict resolution. Teachers reported notable improvements in students' social skills, communication, and respect for diversity, contributing to more inclusive

The programme also documented reductions in gender-based teasing and increased supportive peer interactions (Achyut et al., 2017).

and supportive school and home environments that encouraged sustained participation from both boys and girls. However, due to the lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, most schools were not able to complete the full programme, and it was not possible to evaluate its outcomes (Mulenga et al., 2020).

Happy Schools (Portugal)

The programme has led to initial shifts in school culture, with more principals and educators actively prioritizing students' well-being. Improvements include a marked increase in staff commitment to creating happier, more inclusive environments, with structured activities contributing to lower incidences of bullying and higher student satisfaction rates (UNESCO, 2024c). The intervention primarily served as a diagnostic tool,

enabling the school community to identify factors contributing to their happiness and well-being. Thus, it did not include statistical evidence of outcomes, but laid the groundwork for future iterations, which will involve structured activities designed to address the identified areas of need and measure the impacts systematically (UNESCO, 2024c).

Lifting Limits (United Kingdom)

Teachers reported heightened awareness of gender issues and greater confidence in addressing stereotypes in classrooms. Surveys from participating schools show improved awareness and confidence among educators and students in discussing gender norms (Lifting Limits, 2019). The programme reported notable reductions in gender-stereotypical attitudes related to occupations, objects, and activities across year groups. For example, Early Years learners (up to age 5) were approximately twice as likely to say a nurse, cleaner, builder and doctor are 'for everyone' after the pilot. Similarly, more than three

times as many Early Years children said that football is 'for everyone' and nearly twice as many children in years 1 and 2 said that dolls were 'for everyone' at the end of the pilot (Lifting Limits, 2019). Longer-term impact was reflected in the increased number of schools independently adopting the programme's materials and training resources and the continued integration of the programme's principles in teaching practices. This has led to a sustained reduction in stereotyping and improved collaboration between students of all genders (Lifting Limits, 2019).

CwR (Zambia)

Reported outcomes include enhanced interpersonal skills among students, with 65 percent of boys reporting improved relationships and more positive attitudes towards gender equality after the intervention. Although there were small increases in self-reporting of being teased (by boys, from 15 percent to 18 percent) and being touched in a sexual way (by girls, from 6 to 8 percent), this may be attributable to increased awareness and recognition of these behaviours. Educators nevertheless

reported an overall reduction in aggressive behaviours and a lasting change in students' approach to resolving disputes (UNESCO, 2022a). These findings suggest that the programme fostered sustained behavioural change and instilled values of empathy and respect, positively influencing the overall school environment, although further efforts are needed to raise awareness about gender-based violence.

Study participants' views of programme success

Half of the programmes (GEMS, India; Boys' Impact, United Kingdom⁸, and CwR, Zambia) were found to have indirect benefits related to engagement. For example, study participants from these contexts noted boys' increased engagement in education as a positive consequence of working on areas such as increased self-esteem, emotional literacy, aspirations and belonging. In Zambia, while absenteeism persisted, it was seen as significantly decreased and no longer driven by issues such as bullying

or violence at school. Instead, absenteeism was described largely as a result of home-related issues, such as lack of food or medicine, which are understood as common challenges in Zambia. Despite these home issues, students are described as feeling safe and protected at school, highlighting the positive impact of the CwR programme in creating a secure school environment. **Table 5** summarizes the key insights from programmes.

Table 5. Insights from programmes promoting gender-equitable attitudes and practices

Intervention	Insights
Cambodia, LSEP	<i>... [male students] used to think that house chores were their mother's job, not theirs, so they wouldn't do them. Now, they help their mothers do house chores. We also followed up with their families during the home visit. We asked them how their sons' behaviours were now. They told us that they were surprised to see a lot of changes in their son. Now, they wash dishes after eating, wash their own clothes, and don't leave their clothes around like before. (Male facilitator, Cambodia)</i>
India, GEMS	<i>All these things changed. Boys also started sweeping (brooming) work. The girls were not able to lift heavy things, but they started doing that too. Some changes were seen in school. In school, when some guests came, girls were asked to serve water or tea, but boys were also asked to do those things, and they started doing it ... One thing that their vision was different about school, that too was changed, and there were gaps between boys and girls, i.e. playing separately that also changed. Where girls and boys are playing together and games like kabaddi, in which they have to touch each other ... Lots of change in behaviour in school happened. Their seating arrangement also changed, boys and girls started to sit next to each other. (Male educator, India)</i>
Malawi, VYA 2.0	<i>Yes, it really helped to promote those values because it was also one of the mindset change interventions among the very young adolescents. So, we could see how these trainings impacted the young adolescents and how they started becoming more open in sharing on some of the abuses and, at the same time, they started giving us the feedback on what they observed both from themselves and their friends. Some of them were concerned because when we're giving them ... this information, they were getting worried and when we ask[ed] them why, it's when they started opening up about the challenges they face at home. So that one can be evidence that the intervention had an impact on gender inclusion as well. (Male implementer, Malawi)</i>
Portugal, Happy Schools	<i>We saw the happiness of the children at the end of the Gala – they were able to overcome shyness and anxiety to speak in public. (Male implementer, Portugal)</i>
United Kingdom, Lifting Limits	<i>So an example of a boy who engaged with [the programme] just very fully and naturally is ... a 9-year-old who had a younger sister and he was describing how he felt really encouraged and supported by the programme to play more and differently with his younger sister, you know, and to encourage her to embrace a range of different toys and also he himself. Then, you know, experimenting with different ways of playing and being through that relationship. (Male implementer, United Kingdom)</i>
Zambia, CwR	<i>One of the impacts is that, after exposing the boys to CwR, they feel a sense of belonging and there is improvement in academic performance and motivation also. Because as we talk to them, they feel like they are also dependable, they are also human beings hence they feel motivated and their performance also improves. Apart from that, the behaviour changes to towards goodness. So, you know boys mostly engage in these bad behaviours and the like. So, through CwR the behaviour changed to the better. (Male master trainer, Zambia)</i>

Data source: Research finding of authors, 2025.

⁸ Boys' impact was analysed within the broader context of educational initiatives in the United Kingdom that specifically target boys and/or gender equality.

Outcomes with the potential to be gender-transformative

Across the programmes reviewed, several outcomes emerged as having the potential to be gender-transformative:

- Improved knowledge of gender norms and stereotypes
- Increased empowerment and increased confidence
- Positive behaviour change, including reduced violent and disruptive behaviour and increased engagement at school
- Improved mental well-being and emotional expression
- Greater capacity to challenge gender norms and reflect on masculinity and relationships.

In the GEMS (India) programme, issues of gender norms and masculinity were addressed in ways that enabled both boys and girls to feel comfortable to share their concerns and lived experiences.

Similarly, LSEP (Cambodia) found that boys developed stronger life skills, including time management, and social skills with increased confidence emerging as a key outcome. Greater confidence was reported among young people in Happy Schools (Portugal). As one United Kingdom-based study participant shared, increased confidence has broader benefits:

“ ... ultimately, if young people are feeling more confident, if they are feeling empowered, if they’re feeling valued and listened to, they are more likely to be able to succeed at whatever it is that they want to succeed at.

– Female facilitator, United Kingdom

Behavioural change was another significant outcome. LSEP (Cambodia) reported that boys showed a heightened ability to navigate conflict and violence constructively. Similarly, CwR (Zambia) documented reductions in negative behaviours among boys, including fighting and bullying, alongside a greater sense of belonging in schools. In GEMS (India), these changes contributed to improvements in the school environment:

“ ... with all that effort, we also see positive improvement in school environment, which really helps student to spend more time in school and not necessarily rush to run away from the school.

– Female implementer, India

In Portugal, facilitators observed strong engagement in the Happy Schools programme. Despite participation being voluntary, no learners dropped out over the course of the year, suggesting a high level of engagement and commitment.

Overall, key outcomes reported for both boys and girls included a greater understanding of themselves and their roles within their families and communities. Developing skills to reflection on emotions and relationships helped foster a sense of belonging, confidence, and self-belief contributing to a more positive school culture.

Participants also reported positive changes extending into young people’s home lives, indicating deeper engagement with programme messages. LSEP (Cambodia) found that boys were more willing to participate in household chores, more likely to challenge gender stereotypes and discriminatory remarks, more likely to assist female classmates, and more empathic and respectful towards women in their life.

Finally, programmes also had positive outcomes on educators and facilitators. These included greater confidence (GEMS, India; Lifting Limits, United Kingdom) and a stronger commitment to gender-transformative and inclusive practices. Furthermore, for programmes that cultivated parental involvement, positive impacts were noted:

“ I have never known about gender before. I didn’t understand it clearly. However, I understood this lesson after I received three days’ training. I rarely did housework before such as cooking, but I changed, and I no longer divide those tasks after I studied. I almost do all the household chores and let my wife relax.

– Male facilitator, Cambodia

How success is formally measured

Each programme takes a different approach to measuring success. The most robust M&E systems were found in LSEP (Cambodia) and GEMS (India), most likely due to their integration within larger programmes focused more

broadly on gender and/or education. Some innovative measures of success were identified in the GEMS (India) and Happy Schools (Portugal) programmes.

Multiple modes and techniques

The scoping study found that programmes typically employ quantitative methods (such as KAP surveys and school administrative data) and qualitative techniques (including FGDs and interviews) to capture both breadth and depth of programme outcomes.

Implementers of LSEP, Room to Read Cambodia, developed a robust M&E framework aligned with their broader operations. This included the generation of learning insights from the pilot phase to inform programme refinement and potential scale-up. A comprehensive evaluation plan was developed, encompassing baseline, midline and endline assessments.

These evaluations also considered stakeholder experiences, complementing key programme indicators. Quantitative data analysis was conducted for both internal and external reporting purposes, while qualitative data collected through focus groups and in-depth interviews provided richer insights into the experiences of students, educators and programme staff to understand programme implementation and impact.

A similarly rigorous approach was evident in GEMS (India), although the specific measurements and research tools used were context-dependent. M&E methods included school profiling, community-based baseline surveys and endline assessments conducted at programme completion.

M&E activities were facilitated through a management information system that captured qualitative and quantitative information, including session attendance, participation levels, frequency of sessions, and structured opportunities for self-reflection, questions and suggestions for improvement. Educators completed pre- and post-test forms during trainings to assess shifts in understanding and perspectives. Regular interaction with nodal educators responsible for conducting the sessions helped to identify emerging challenges. As one district coordinator explained, low attendance in particular sessions prompted follow-up with field facilitators and nodal educators to understand and address the reason.

Flexibility and adaptation

In the United Kingdom, measurements of success were often locally defined to reflect the community needs, highlighting the importance of context and flexibility. Evidence-based learning was seen as important for improving the design and impact of the programmes.

“... what we want to do is support and empower those school leaders to take an approach that's evidence-based but flexible enough to work for them, where we are not claiming expertise about what their students need and telling them how to achieve those goals. Providing with them with the resources and the knowledge and the understanding to reach those conclusions themselves.

– Male programme leader, United Kingdom

A similar approach was offered by programme staff in Zambia, who highlighted the need to be open to 'going back to the drawing board' to ensure success:

“... sometimes you've had these programmes failing because there are times we don't go back to the drawing board. Like I think it's important that sometimes we don't just look at, you know, you know, continuous going forward, but we should also consider, like, the issue of, you know, trying to get back to the community, ask the people, like, if we are to succeed to go forward, you look at what challenges have we faced so far from the inception up to where we are before we can think of taking another step forward.

– Female implementer, Zambia

During the United Kingdom workshop, participants noted the importance of critically reflecting on whose measures of success matter most for programme implementation.

They asked: are evaluation and learning designed to answer to parents, communities and/or policymakers?

Measurement innovations

Beyond the robust multimodal approaches adopted by LSEP and GEMS, three innovative measurement practices were identified: the use of participants as co-creators of knowledge (Happy Schools, Portugal), using digital technology for real-time reflection from facilitators (GEMS, India) and appreciative enquiry to reframe measures of success (Taking Boys Seriously, United Kingdom⁹).

Co-creating knowledge with primary stakeholders:

Happy Schools (Portugal) surveyed students, primary caregivers, educators and school staff in a knowledge co-creation activity. This generated locally relevant insights and strengthened community buy-in, aligning with the *Data Must Speak* recommendations for good practice (Jarousse et al., 2019). However, some noted that while this approach helped them to understand challenges, it but did always generate clear solutions:

“ These results gave a diagnosis of the situation. Now, the ideal would be for the school itself – through its self-evaluation team – to take that data and use it to make improvements.

– Female educator, Portugal

Instead, programme success was measured through student retention (with no students withdrawing during the academic year) and through skills development, including communication and emotional skills and data collection and analysis).

Digital technologies: GEMS (India) utilized digital technologies to capture educator feedback following GEMS sessions. In Rajasthan, a mobile application enabled educators with the help of field facilitators to submit reflections alongside other factual information. This provided valuable programme data, and supported facilitators, and field offices could respond to any pressing concerns or reflections immediately. In Jharkhand, a Google-based reporting system was used after each GEMS session, with field facilitators often completing submissions due to educator workload. These tools also captured observations of educators' interest and comfort, support needs, and student inquiries and educator

responses. Facilitators also collected feedback from four randomly selected students after each session regarding the usefulness and relevance of the topics discussed and what they understood and did not understand. These real-time feedback mechanisms helped to manage responses to concerns and gaps, and can be regarded as a key strength for programme success.

Appreciative inquiry: Innovation in measuring success can be found in the 'appreciative inquiry' model adopted by the Taking Boys Seriously model in the United Kingdom. Through this approach, facilitators seek to counter the deficit discourse that shapes many programmes aimed at boys.

“ To try and counter the deficit [discourse] in Ireland, we did our case studies using that thing that we called appreciative inquiry. So, all we ever do is we ask boys what works well, what helps, what inspires you, what motivates you to do better, what are the things that the teachers do that help you learn. We ask teachers what have you done that you've seen makes a difference to the boys? How has that engaged them? What are the things that help them in their practice? And we always use appreciative inquiries.

– Female researcher, United Kingdom

Appreciative inquiry involves framing questions to allow for a focus on the assets, positives and strengths of a particular intervention and/or context. This works on the premise that deficit discourses 'not only creates images that restrict creativity, hope and success, but that if you look at problems, you tend to find and create more problems. Conversely if you look for success, you are more likely to find and create more success' (Preskill and Catsambas 2006, p. 4). The consequence of this is that any evidence of success or good practice is celebrated, especially if already existing. This helps to reframe thinking around boys as a 'problem' to be 'fixed' but as individuals with strengths and potential to be developed. It also has the potential to boost the morale of the team working to deliver positive change in boys' lives.

⁹ Taking Boys Seriously was analysed within the broader context of educational initiatives in the United Kingdom that specifically target boys and/or gender equality.

A young boy in a light blue school shirt and dark blue shorts is running joyfully in a schoolyard. He is smiling broadly and looking down. In the background, other children in similar uniforms are visible, some standing and some moving. The ground is sandy. A blue banner with white text is overlaid on the image.

7. Scaling programmes

Key messages

- Scaling remains a key challenge for programmes addressing boys' disengagement from education, with many programmes not yet in a position to go to scale.
- Horizontal scaling – expanding programmes to new locations or beneficiaries – is the most common approach identified in the study, but its application is uneven.
- Vertical scaling – embedding programmes into subnational or national systems – is crucial for sustainable impact.
- Limited resources constrain scaling; institutionalization and buy-in at multiple levels are needed.
- Functional scaling – diversifying and expanding programme activities to reach more participants and achieve deeper impact – could be achieved through curriculum development, teacher training, and CPD for facilitators.

This chapter provides an overview of scaling approaches in education and examines whether these strategies have been applied to the programmes studied. Findings reveal uneven approaches to scaling and highlight the need for 'the flexibility to test and pivot in different directions is an integral part of any scaling journey' (IDIA, 2017, p. 6). Horizontal scaling was the most common, underpinning the GEMS (India) and Happy Schools (Portugal) programmes. The LSEP (Cambodia), Lifting Limits (United Kingdom) and CwR (Zambia) programmes all noted the need for further evaluation before scaling. **Table 6** compiles factors that enable or impede scaling of educational programming.

Approaches to scaling educational programmes

Scaling education programmes is understood as a process for enhancing educational outcomes, ensuring that successes are not due to individual project dynamics or unsustainable funding models (Olsen, 2021). Effective scaling is thoughtful, multifaceted, deep, and culturally embedded, capable of influencing relationships, cultural values and beliefs to create sustainable impact (Moore et al., 2015). Key factors shaping scale include 'need, relative advantage, clarity, compatibility, quality, practicality, complexity, trialability, and observability' (Kaur, 2015, p. 108). Scaling can take various forms.

Horizontal scaling, also known as scaling out, replication or diffusion, involves broadening the reach of a programme and expanding it to new geographic areas or additional beneficiaries. This involves replicating tested approaches, while adapting methods to new contexts (Hartmann and Linn, 2007; Moore et al., 2015). For example, the *Hands-On Learning* programme in the United Arab Emirates adapted a successful educational model from Australia to engage at-risk secondary school students in Ras Al Khaimah. Through practical activities and collaborative learning, the programme effectively re-engaged male students in education, enhancing self-esteem and concentration in the classroom. The creation of a toolkit to facilitate replication in additional schools reflected a strategic effort to horizontally scale and increase the programme's influence in the region (Rizvi, 2019; Ridge et al., 2017).

Vertical scaling, or mainstreaming, integrates key aspects of a programme into broader government systems at the national or subnational levels, embedding it into standard operations to achieve systemic change. Key strategies include the engagement of champions, such as school leaders, government officials and educators, at every stage to align initiatives with organizational cultures,

enabling programme integration, resonance and sustainability (Olsen, 2021). Champions act not merely as supporters but as co-creators throughout the scaling process. For example, the *Families Matter* programme in Cambodia mainstreamed puberty education into Ministries of Education and Health programmes in Cambodia (Chandra-Mouli and Patel, 2017). GEMS (India) successfully lobbied the State government to integrate teacher training components into regular teacher training programmes, while supporting capacity-building among government teacher trainers (Achyut et al., 2017).

Compound scaling, also called grafting or functional scaling, focuses on diversifying and expanding the range of activities or areas of engagement within a programme or organization (Olsen et al., 2024). Compound scaling integrates both vertical and horizontal scaling, where a programme is institutionalized (vertical) and replicated (horizontal) to maximize its reach and sustainability. This model also provides the groundwork for establishing communities of practice, where educators, researchers, policymakers and donors can collaborate, exchange resources and engage in continuous programme adaptation (Maaß and Artigue, 2013; Kaur, 2015).

The *Escuela Nueva* model illustrates successful compound scaling. Developed in Colombia in the 1970s to tackle challenges in rural, multigrade classrooms, it shifted from conventional, educator-centred methods towards a student-centred, participatory frameworks that prioritized cooperative and self-directed learning. The model improved educational access and engagement among under-represented students (Purcell, 2017; Muwanguzi et al., 2023). Its success in Colombia facilitated its integration into national education policy by the 1990s, reaching over 20,000 schools and becoming a fundamental element of the national curriculum, exemplifying vertical scaling

(Briggs, 2013). In terms of horizontal scaling, the *Escuela Nueva* model has inspired adaptations in Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Uganda, Viet Nam and Zambia. These adaptations address challenges faced by rural, low-

income communities, demonstrating the model's versatility and relevance in diverse contexts (Nikitina et al., 2021; Dekawati and Kurnaeti, 2023).

Interviewees' experiences of scaling

The scoping study found a range of scaling approaches in the programmes reviewed. The implementation stage – from ideation to sustainable scale – varied, with most programmes still at the 'proof of concept' stage or operating only within the capacity allowed by available resources. Scaling remains a key challenge for programmes seek to addressing boys' educational engagement and attainment.

GEMS (India) is the most developed in terms of scale as it was '*designed keeping scalability in mind*' (Female implementer, India), achieving compound scaling at an earlier stage than for the *Escuela Nueva* model described above. Initially implemented for Grades 6 to 8 students in schools across Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Rajasthan states, GEMS expanded in a second phase to Grade 6-11 students in 271 schools in the hard-to-reach Godda and Jamtara districts of Jharkhand. ICRW with financial support of Echidna Giving, worked in collaboration with the State government, and in partnership with Badlao Foundation in this intervention which trained 450 educators, 200 principals and 61 Block Resource Persons and Cluster Resource Persons, reaching 30,000 adolescent girls and boys. GEMS was also expanded to Bangladesh, the Philippines and Viet Nam.

Enabling factors for GEMS include context-specific project design, with both content and themes tailored to local cultures, and the distinct needs of the target population. For example, the programme in Viet Nam addressed homophobia, Bangladesh focused on child marriage, and India focused on masculinity and gender norms.

Happy Schools (Portugal) followed similar principles of adaptation in scaling, adapting a broader UNESCO framework to local contexts. Horizontal scaling principles were applied and can be considered a good practice example of adapting to different regional contexts. Key challenges to scaling included limited resources and insufficient understanding of the issues' significance.

The GEMS project (India) was the only programme examined that achieved substantive scaling. Through

engagement on multiple levels, ICRW was able to achieve vertical scaling by increasing awareness of the importance of building educators' capacity in the area of gender and masculinity. As a result, the State government has extended teacher training programmes to additional districts and schools.

For the other programmes examined, potential mechanisms that could allow for scaling were identified, including:

- **Open sourcing:** The open sourcing of materials shared among teaching communities was identified as key to the delivery of programmes in Portugal and the United Kingdom. In Happy Schools, this was managed through closed WhatsApp groups but has the potential for genuine open sourcing. Lifting Limits provides a range of freely accessible resources in multiple languages, including assemblies, lesson plans and activities for schools and families.
- **Teacher training:** Training teachers and educators to deliver gender-transformative programming was identified across all the projects analysed. Training educators already in post was central to building programme champions within schools. Buy-in from school leaders and continued CPD was considered essential to the success of teacher training.
- **Curriculum development:** Embedding gender-transformative content within the existing curriculum was noted in GEMS (India) as key to enable a 'whole-school approach' and ensure learning outcomes are embedded within already existing programming.
- **Accreditation:** Providing accreditation for schools is a central component to the Gender Action for Schools Award programme¹⁰ in the United Kingdom. The programme has four status award levels – 'supporter', 'initiator', 'champion' and 'beacon' – that reflect the institution's commitment to challenging gender stereotypes. Accreditation is provided by Gender Action assessors based on evidence provided

¹⁰ Gender Action was analysed within the broader context of educational initiatives in the United Kingdom that specifically target boys and/or gender equality.

of their actions and impact, and demonstrating that their efforts are making a difference. Accreditation in the form of certificates was also proposed as a reason for the scaling success of the LSEP intervention in Cambodia.

- **Social franchising:** Social franchising is the model adopted by the Boys' Impact intervention in the United Kingdom. Through this model, regional hubs are developed and mentored in the early stages. As this intervention was only launched in 2023, there has not been any evaluation of the success of this model.

- **Influencing public policy:** All of the programmes were seen to potentially benefit from influencing public policy and lobbying, but none had been successful so far. Buy-in from policymakers was understood to provide an enabling environment for individual programmes as well as the wider ecosystem.

Table 6 summarizes the key factors that enable or impede scaling of education programming according to interviewed participants.

Table 6. Factors that enable or impede scaling of education programming

Factors that enable scaling	Factors that impede scaling
<p>Adequate resourcing of activities (especially human and infrastructural resources), including training, classroom facilities and time.</p> <p>Ongoing support and CPD for trained educators. Adequate time and mentorship was necessary to prepare and adapt new approaches and materials.</p> <p>Full integration into the school curriculum and ecosystem would be the most ideal way to deliver this programme.</p> <p>Buy-in from school leaders and senior management provided a culture of support and commitment, signalled the significance of the work, and provided necessary resourcing to staff members. This helps to enable a 'whole-school approach' which was seen to be desirable.</p> <p>Buy-in from the wider community, particularly primary caregivers who can support with homework tasks and provide additional space for conversations for young people involved.</p> <p>Identification of key stakeholders and champions and engagement with them from the outset. Best practice would see them as co-creators of knowledge with clearly defined purposes (as noted by Data Must Speak in UNICEF, 2023)</p> <p>Flexibility within the programme allowed facilitators to adapt activities to the needs of the local population.</p>	<p>Shortage of qualified facilitators and educators, resistance from some educators to teach in addition to their subject areas.</p> <p>Inadequate resourcing of activities, including time in the day to deliver additional curriculum.</p> <p>Lack of time to meaningfully implement the programme and adapt materials to distinct populations.</p> <p>Lack of time within the school day to prepare classrooms and/or deliver the programme alongside existing curriculum pressures.</p> <p>Lack of ongoing training of and resource allocation to those delivering the programmes. This hindered longer-term sustainability.</p> <p>A lack of a clear and shared sense of urgency in addressing boys' educational disengagement underpins all of the programmes examined in this scoping study – this was noted as a challenge at all levels of delivery (from government and ministries through to educators). One of the main challenges encountered was the belief that equality has been achieved and that such programmes are unnecessary.</p> <p>Limited understanding and/or motivation among primary caregivers to support young people in their educational journey related to gender equality.</p> <p>Cultural resistance, often framed by a misunderstanding of the programme's aims.</p> <p>Lack of policy and wider governmental support supported a culture of disinterest in programmes aimed at boys' educational engagement and attainment.</p>

Source: Authors, from Key Informant Interviews on scaling factors conducted in 2025.



8. Conclusion and recommendations

Improving educational opportunities for girls remain of paramount importance to achieving gender equality globally. However, ensuring that boys are not left behind is also essential, both from a rights-based perspective and for instrumental reasons (Monkmann and Hoffman, 2013). Keeping boys in school and learning offers opportunities to work with them to develop positive masculinities and supporting broader gender equality goals.

As demonstrated in this study, very few of the programmes considered were designed exclusively for boys. Rather, their success was grounded in whole-school approaches that mainstream inclusive and equitable values into school practices and engage with a wider supportive ecosystem. As such, supporting boys' engagement in education does not come at the expense of girls' advancement. Instead, when boys learn about and embrace gender equality, they have the potential to become change-makers and important allies in the movement for a more just and equal society. This scoping study recommends that programmes start before boys' 10th birthday, to reshape the broader peer culture, as well as family and social dynamics (Smith et al., 2018; Levy et al., 2020). Gender-transformative approaches to addressing boys' disengagement from education carry a dual imperative: improving school participation and learning *and* improving gender equality in and through education.

Successful programmes should intentionally resist pathologizing boys and should not be based on a discourse of what is wrong. Rather than viewing boys only as problems to be fixed, using an asset-based lens can uncover values, strengths and aspirations that can be leveraged to foster boys' academic success and their positive development as gender-equitable individuals. By doing so, boys' disengagement might be recognized as a response to rigid gender norms that discourage emotional expression, help-seeking, and connection – all traits essential to learning and well-being. The goal is not to 'fix' boys, but to reshape the expectations, cultural messages and environments that limit their potential and disconnect them from school.

Finally, the effective implementation and scaling of programmes need to be aware of and respond to the particular contexts of boys' lives. Proven content and pedagogy should not be transferred wholesale across settings, but carefully adapted to local realities to ensure their relevance and effectiveness. Engaging with a range of stakeholders, including young people themselves, is an important part of this process.

Drawing on these findings, the study offers recommendations for the successful design, delivery

and adaptation of sustainable and inclusive gender-transformative educational programming for boys that promotes positive masculinities and re-engages them with education.

1. Create an enabling policy environment addressing all learners' needs

Programmes are most effective when they are embedded in an enabling policy environment and aligned with existing policies. For VYA 2.0 (Malawi) and CwR (Zambia), participants noted a supportive policy environment. Lifting Limits (United Kingdom) aligned its work with current education policies. An enabling policy environment requires the development of gender-responsive education sector plans and policies, including a broader equity approach where challenges disproportionately experienced by or specific to boys are identified and acknowledged to ensure that the needs of all learners are addressed regardless of their gender, abilities, or other characteristics.

2. Comprehensively train and build the capacity of educators and facilitators on gender equality, masculinities and boys' disengagement from education

Educators and facilitators need thorough training on gender equality, masculinities and boys' disengagement from education. Participants emphasized the importance of comprehensive upfront training alongside ongoing in-service education, CPD and guidance to deliver programmes with confidence and a greater sense of agency. For example, ongoing professional development in LSEP (Cambodia) supported the consistent and effective delivery of the curriculum.

Gender awareness training should precede pedagogical training and should address the gendered realities that boys and girls face, as well as the rationale for programme interventions. Teachers need to know *how* to teach about gender equality and masculinities and *what* to teach, as well as how to engage boys in education. Educators should also have structured opportunities to reflect critically on gender norms and expectations, including their own biases, and the gender dynamics they observe in schools and communities. This reflection is essential for preparing educators to support learners effectively, teach gender-related content, and overcome personal resistance to the training and programmes.

Specialist training is also key. Programmes working with sensitive topics, such as sexual health and gender-based violence, or disclosure of abuse. VYA 2.0 (Malawi) highlighted the importance of safeguarding training

for educators to handle student disclosure safely and refer students to relevant services. GEMS (India) found that additional training is particularly useful for longer-serving educators.

Mentoring and peer support are key mechanisms to support educators and facilitators. School-based supervision, and the creation of communities of practice across schools, can help strengthen skills, build and maintain motivation, and create a combined sense of purpose. Skills in positive discipline can help educators move away from corporal punishment and foster safer, more inclusive learning environments.

Institutional support is essential for sustainable capacity development. School leadership must acknowledge and support educators' training needs, provide mentorship and allocate sufficient space and time to allow for programme delivery. VYA 2.0 (Malawi) and Connect with Respect (Zambia) recommended that where facilitators are overburdened, financial rewards could incentivize educators and support learners' engagement.

3. Adopt a whole-school approach

A whole-school approach that spans a young person's educational journey and embeds inclusive, gender-equitable practices across the school can promote school engagement

and positive change. It ensures that programmes are implemented successfully and comprehensively rather than reaching only a subset of educators or learners. This approach also facilitates the creation of safe spaces and peer-to-peer education with shared accountability.

Whole-school approach should be holistically embedded and complementary to the cultural context with curricula and activities delivered across age groups and subject areas. The CwR programme in Zambia highlighted the importance of putting boys' educational attainment on the wider educational agenda to address the perception that a focus on girls in Zambia has led to boys being 'left behind' and becoming a 'future problem'. Embedding gender-transformative lessons into the curriculum led to a normalization of discussions on gender and equity, while signalling institutional commitment. Successful whole-school approaches reach beyond the school gates to engage with parents, caregivers and the wider community.

Lifting Limits (United Kingdom) considers that a spiral approach to the curriculum, revisiting topics across time at increasing levels of complexity, is an especially good practice. This approach is most effective when mainstreamed into a formal curricula over longer time periods.



4. Train school leadership to be supportive and change-oriented

Supportive school leadership is essential to the effective implementation of any innovative programmes or curricula, including those that are gender-transformative. Principals and school management can model gender-equitable values, hold educators and other staff accountable, and integrate practices into school policies. Happy Schools (Portugal) reported that dedicated principals who see the value in the work being done can prompt a cultural shift within schools and are best positioned to integrate key practices into school policies. Lifting Limits (United Kingdom), Happy Schools (Portugal) and GEMS (India) reported that trained, motivated and passionate educators can take the lead to bring about change and champion the roll out of programme activities and dialogue in schools.

5. Meaningfully engage caregivers and key stakeholders

Programmes must engage the wider ecosystem of a child's life. Parents and caregivers play a critical role and should be briefed, sensitized and encouraged to support their children through positive reinforcement, feedback and participation. For example, LSEP (Cambodia) and VYA 2.0 (Malawi) held sessions for parents and guardians to raise awareness of the issues being taught to their children. While LSEP (Cambodia) embedded parental engagement as a core component of the programme, it noted that some parents were hesitant to attend sessions due to a lack of understanding and/or motivation.

Key stakeholders, including relevant ministries, senior leaders, individual educators and partner organizations, should be identified early and engaged as part of the programme design to create enabling environments for addressing boys' educational challenges. For example, VYA 2.0 (Malawi) identified other male-focused programmes with shared goals for collaboration. LSEP (Cambodia) noted the value of the broader Room to Read programme in achieving success. In Portugal, local government, community organizations and universities were crucial to the ongoing success of the Happy Schools project. It was found in Malawi that where there is a high level of NGO involvement, engagement with key members of the community, particularly community chiefs, was crucial to communicating programme aims:

“ Parents and the community need to be involved ... they should be well informed of what the programme is all about and how it will

be carried out. We should also meet the parents and chiefs. If the chiefs are involved, they may put bylaws to control their subjects if they were doing some abuses like stopping kids from attending school.

– Female implementer, Malawi

6. Adopt a strengths-based approach and counter deficit discourses on boys

Participants in several countries, including the United Kingdom and Zambia, highlighted the importance of avoiding deficit discourses when working with boys. Programmes should not frame boys as 'problems to be fixed'; instead a strengths-based approach, such as appreciative inquiry, should be adopted. This approach values boys' voices and lived experiences, allowing them to participate actively in the ways they are understood and supported, and enabling them to be active meaning-makers in the discourses that shape their lives.

For example, the Happy Schools project in Portugal engaged participants through creative outputs such as podcasts and the analysis of evaluation data, providing opportunities for boys (and young people more broadly) to shape positive narratives around boyhood and masculinity while also acknowledging and addressing challenges. Celebration events, such as galas, can also be used to foster belonging, pride and self-esteem. M&E should be designed not only on overall programme success but also how effectively they have applied a strengths-based approach.

7. Keep programmes flexible in design and application so they can be adapted to different contexts

The successful whole-school delivery of programmes requires a significant degree of flexibility so programmes can be adapted and tailored to the needs of schools and wider communities. Participatory evaluation, including input from primary stakeholders, can help inform programme design, anticipated impact, and ongoing adjustments. An understanding and recognition of intersectionality is key; programmes should consider the diverse needs of learners, particularly those who are vulnerable or hard-to-reach, and adapt interventions accordingly.

Flexibility also means reconsidering what success looks like. For example, rigid assessment mechanisms (such as teaching to the test) may fail to capture important

outcomes like non-cognitive skills development, emotional growth or shifts in gender attitudes. Implementers should be prepared to adjust M&E tools to better reflect meaningful learning and engagement.

8. Build in robust and innovative monitoring and measures of success

The programmes reviewed showed wide variation in the quality and depth of M&E, signalling an opportunity for improvement. LSEP (Cambodia) and GEMS (India) The demonstrated the most robust approaches, with extensive piloting, baseline and endline data collection, ongoing monitoring of project efficacy, and learning and adaptation informed by data collected.

Innovative approaches identified include:

- close engagement with primary stakeholders to identify needs and define valued outcomes;
- the use of digital technologies to provide real-time feedback to educators and learners (GEMS, India);
- appreciative inquiry, an asset-based evaluation method adopted by Taking Boys Seriously (Ireland and the United Kingdom) which frames questions around strengths, successes and positive outcomes. This approach encourages collaboration between educators, facilitators and students as co-learners, supporting meaningful engagement with issues of masculinities while countering deficit narratives.

Indicators should be contextually relevant, capturing outcomes such as school attendance, participation in class, and reductions in emotional and behavioural challenges. These indicators should be regularly reviewed and adapted mid-delivery if necessary to be responsive to learners' needs.

9. Strengthen opportunities for scaling up from the outset

Several approaches to scaling up were identified in the programmes explored in this study. Compound scaling used by GEMS in India enabled programmes to be delivered in different geographical regions and integrated into formal schooling structures. Other approaches, such as open sourcing, teacher training, curriculum

development, accreditation, social franchising and influencing public policy, were identified as scalable but had not yet been implemented at scale.

Embedding questions of scalability into programme design and monitoring allows implementers to plan for when and how programmes can be scaled. Key actions recommended by Brookings (2021) include:

- Assessing the feasibility of scaling up an education initiative.
- Identifying opportunities for and constraints to scaling.
- Planning actions to increase the viability of scaling.
- Tracking the evolution of scaling over time.

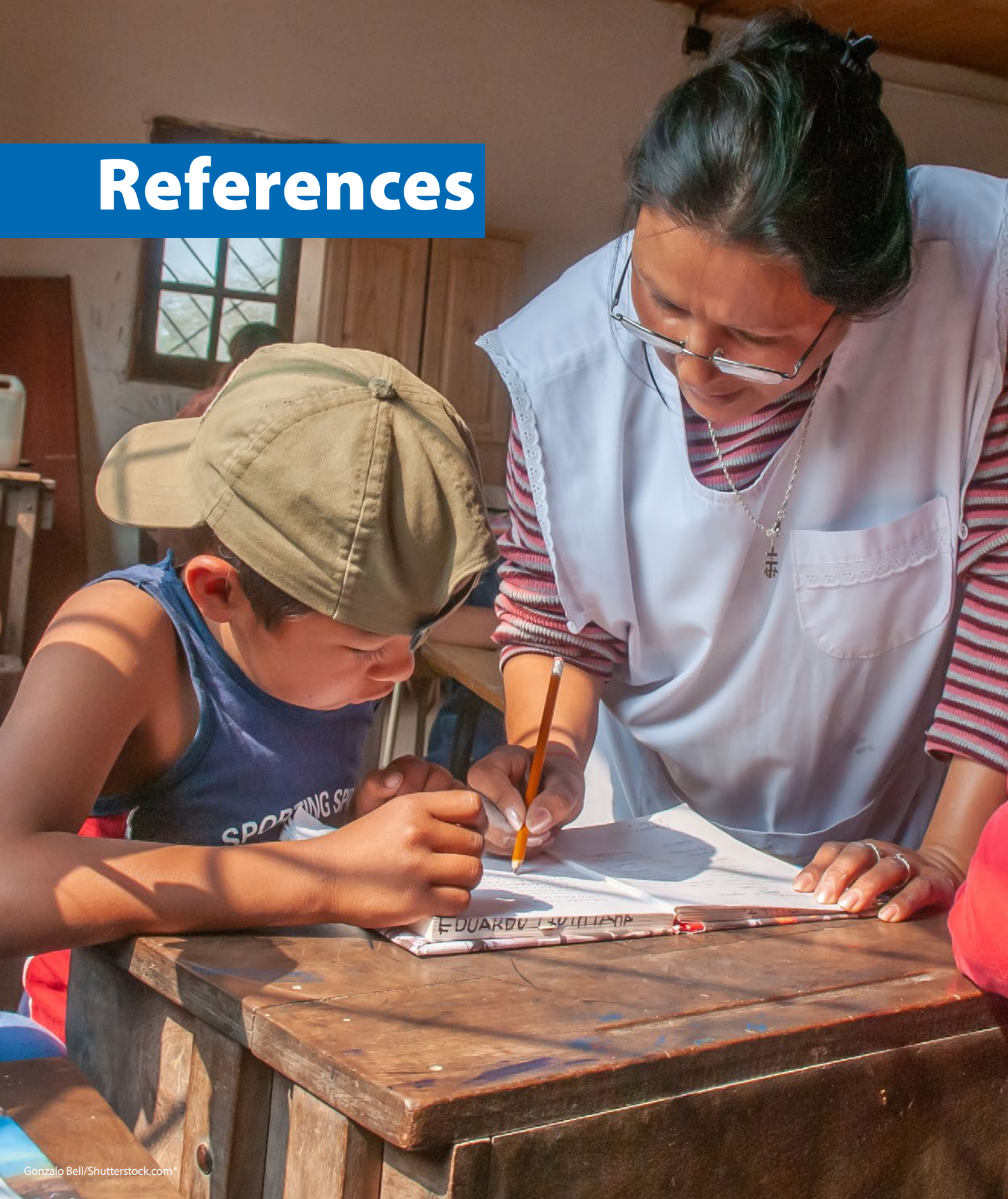
Delivering gender-transformative programmes requires significant engagement with key stakeholders from the outset. Understanding the cultural context helps identify who is best placed to deliver the intervention, such as an existing member of the teaching team or an external facilitator, and ensures that boys and young men themselves are considered integral stakeholders through participatory approaches.

Stakeholder engagement with those who can influence policy is essential to scaling. However, policy change must be monitored and enforced, and dialogue between funders and implementers must be realistic, transparent, and flexible to accommodate distinct cultural contexts. Continued engagement can help ensure awareness of opportunities and challenges for scaling, and support implementation over time.

10. Generate robust evidence for advocacy

To support scaling and policy engagement, programmes must generate robust evidence of success. The LSEP (Cambodia), Lifting Limits (United Kingdom) and CwR (Zambia) programmes all noted the need for further evaluation before scaling. This evidence should address both engagement with education and progress on gender equality. More research is needed to explore how changing harmful and restrictive male gender norms at school can engage boys in learning and enhance learning outcomes.

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Lifting barriers

Boys' disengagement from education

Volume 1: Scoping study

Girls' education has long been promoted to achieve inclusive and quality education for all, yet targeted efforts are also needed to promote boys' education where they are falling behind.

This scoping study aims to explore how educational programmes can challenge gender norms, including harmful and restrictive masculinities, to improve boys' engagement in school and support gender equality more broadly. Insights are drawn from six selected programmes across diverse countries.

Co-published by UNESCO, Equimundo and the University of East Anglia, this volume is part of a series of publications produced within the GPE-KIX *Lifting barriers: Educating boys for gender equality* project, alongside the Cambodia case study (volume 2) and the Malawi case study (volume 3).

