ASPIRATIONAL MISOGYNY
TOOLKIT

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What is Aspirational Misogyny?

"Aspirational misogyny" is a term used to describe a phenomenon in which some men, especially young men, aspire to be like men who are famous for misogynistic beliefs and behaviours, often by adopting attitudes and behaviours that are hostile towards women.

They may not actually believe those attitudes or beliefs but will tell others that they do or seek to play down the consequence of those beliefs or attitudes in order to justify their aspirations or admiration of the famous people. In other words, it refers to men who may not actually hold sexist or misogynistic beliefs but are drawn to the perceived power and dominance of men who do.

Isn't Misogyny a thing of the past?

Misogny has always been prevalent in society, but many perceive it is gaining in popularity and acceptance again. It is difficult to determine whether misogyny is *actually* on the rise globally, as attitudes towards gender and sexism vary across cultures and change over time, so arguably some would say it has never gone away but rather has been hidden, whereas others would say it did decline and is now returning.

However, some data suggests that misogyny and sexism continue to be prevalent issues in many societies. For example, according to a 2021 report by UN Women, 97% of women in a global survey of 18 countries reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment or assault in public spaces, including verbal harassment, unwanted touching, and following or stalking.

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41%

OF ADULTS EXPERIENCED ONLINE HARASSMENT

In addition, the rise of social media has provided a platform for misogynistic content to spread, including online harassment and hate speech directed towards women. A 2018 Pew Research Center study found that 41% of adults had personally experienced online harassment, and women were more likely to experience severe forms of harassment, including sexual harassment and stalking. The Ditch the Label 'Misogyny in a Digital Age' from 2016 shows that this is not a new phenomenon at all, and that it is perpetuated by young women as much as young men.

It is clear that it remains a pervasive problem in many parts of the world, including online.

What is the role of social media?

The rise of social media and online communities has made it easier for misogynistic ideas and attitudes to be voiced, to spread, and gain acceptance. Online forums and social media platforms can provide a sense of anonymity and validation for individuals who hold extreme views, which may contribute to the proliferation of misogyny and other forms of hate speech.

We are living currently in a polarised society, where within a landscape of inequality, hardship and a challenging geo-political landscape, it is understandable that people look for others to blame and criticise. Social media has been shown to perpetuate polarization in society by creating filter bubbles, echo chambers, spreading misinformation, and fostering tribalism, all of which support the spread of aspirational misogyny:

1. **Filter bubbles:** Social media algorithms often use users' past behaviour and preferences to personalize their content feeds. This can create a "filter bubble," where users are primarily exposed to content that reinforces their existing beliefs and perspectives. As a result, users are convinced that 'most people think like me' and may be less likely to encounter different viewpoints, which can contribute to polarization.

2. **Echo chambers:** Social media also allows individuals to curate their own communities and social circles. This can lead to the creation of "echo chambers" where individuals are surrounded by like-minded individuals and rarely exposed to opposing viewpoints. This can further entrench individuals in their existing beliefs and make it difficult to have productive conversations across ideological divides. For young people, this can mean they begin to look at something out of curiosity or interest, and before they are fully aware, they are deeply immersed into a community with those beliefs.

3. **Misinformation:** Social media platforms can also be a breeding ground for misinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news. When people are exposed to false information that reinforces their existing beliefs, they may be more likely to become entrenched in those beliefs and less receptive to alternative viewpoints.

4. **Tribalism:** Social media can also create a sense of "tribalism," where individuals identify with specific groups or communities and view those outside of their group as the "other." This can lead to a heightened sense of polarization and a reluctance to engage in productive dialogue with those who hold different viewpoints.

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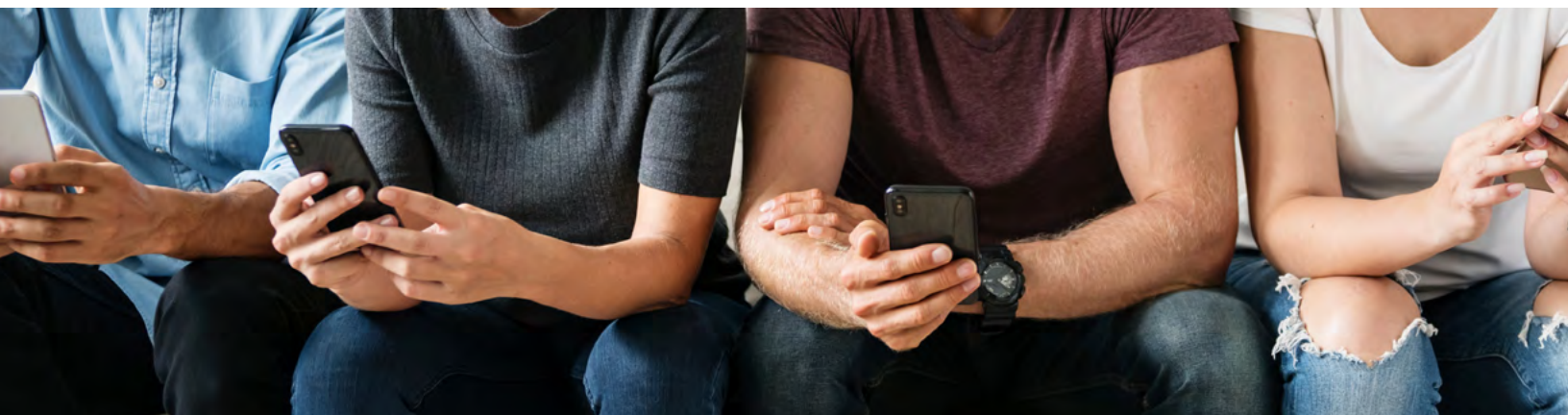
With the rise in social media, came the emergence of social influencers. The social influencer marketing has grown to a billion-dollar industry. One way in which social influencers may be influencing a rise in misogyny is through the messages they convey about gender roles and relationships. Some influencers may promote traditional gender roles, where men are seen as dominant and women as submissive. This can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to a culture of misogyny.

In addition, some social influencers may promote messages that objectify or sexualize women. This can send the message that women are primarily valued for their appearance and can lead to a culture of harassment and discrimination.

It is of course important to note that not all social influencers promote or endorse misogynistic views, and many use their platforms to promote positive messages and values. However, there are some social influencers who have been criticized for promoting or perpetuating misogynistic attitudes and behaviours among their followers, of all genders.

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What impact are we seeing in schools?

Sexism and misogyny are not new, it has always evident in school life, as it is in society. On average, in the UK, one rape per school day is reported to the police as having occurred on school premises. (Bates: Fix the System not the Women, Simon & Shuster, 2022 & OFSTED: (Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, June 2021)

▶ Almost a third of teenage girls say they have been sexually assaulted at school.

▶ Almost 80% of girls say sexual assault happens "sometimes" or "a lot" between people of their age at secondary school and college.

▶ 90% of girls say that being sent unsolicited "dick pics" happens to them or their peers "sometimes" or "a lot".

▶ 75% of girls report that pressure to provide sexual images of themselves happens "sometimes" or "a lot".

▶ And a recent NASUWT poll found that 72% of female teachers have been victims of misogyny in their school and 60% have experienced misogyny from pupils (NASUWT, 2022).

Many young men believe, or say that they believe, that misogynistic behaviour is indicative of masculinity, success, or power, and they may view the degradation or mistreatment of women as acceptable or even desirable. This can easily contribute to a culture within the student body that normalizes and perpetuates misogyny and sexism.

Whilst the impact of people such as Andrew Tate on boys is well documented, we are also seeing an increase in young female influencers, such as Kendal Kay, espousing the SAHG lifestyle (stay at home girlfriend) where a young woman's role is to look beautiful and serve her boyfriend. This is an extension of what has been colloquially termed the 'pick me girl' culture – that is also still very prevalent on social media platforms, in which young women behave in a way, often derogatory to themselves or other women, to be seen as desirable.

STEPS TO TAKE

STEP 1 : Understand Why People Might Find It Attractive (Curiosity not Judgement)

To help us tackle this challenge successfully in schools, we must understand the attraction.

1. **Online presence:** Men with misogynistic views are increasingly having an open online presence, including on social media platforms, which can make them more accessible and visible to followers.

2. **Controversial views:** They are known for having controversial views and opinions, often positioned as conflicting with what young people may feel they are being 'told to think'. Such controversial positioning can attract attention and draw in followers who are drawn to or intrigued by their perspective, or want to separate themselves out as being different, or indeed thinking differently to what they believe is expected of them.

3. **Confidence and charisma:** The messaging is often shared by people with a high level of confidence, a seeming courage to stand up to their critics, and an externally charismatic personality, which can be appealing to young men who are looking for someone to emulate or look up to.

4. **Personal brand and Marketing tactics**: Most have cultivated a personal brand around their life and views, appearing to be rich and successful and with sponsored content, which can be appealing to young disenfranchised men who are drawn to this lifestyle or approach to life. The seeming 'rags to riches' stories play into the attraction of a sense of control when you might otherwise feel powerless.

5. **Feelings of Victimisation or no voice:** Following campaigns like #MeToo and #Everyone's Invited, some young men felt like (particularly where conversations were not positioned well) they were being accused of being sexist of acting like predators with no voice or response. Many people encouraging aspirational misogyny, despite the clear 'alpha male' rhetoric, are straight talking, and try to position themselves as the victim who others are trying to silence.

6. **An easy-digestible solution to a complex world:** Many misogynistic influences will seek to sell historical times (where gendered roles were clear and rigid) as easier, safer and better.

7. **A sense of simple blame for society issues:** As the current media is deliberately polarising society and 'pitting' groups of society against each other in a blame culture, many young people are attracted to the simplicity of a seemingly single enemy to blame (rather than the reality of the complexity of society) and that there is a necessary competition between groups:-

newsround

Why do you think girls do better than boys at school?

The trouble with boys: what lies behind the flood of teenage sexual assault stories?

WOKE WOES Woke brigade 'could tear the UK apart despite being just a noisy minority'

Private schools criticise plans to get more poor students into university

Regulator's pledge to boost university access in England 'may discriminate based on class'

A country divided: why England's North–South divide is getting worse

LGBT crusaders have gone too far.

Immigrants are 'stealing jobs' and Muslims are 'taking over' the country, young believe

Family & Education | Young Reporter

Poor white teens in 'left behind' towns not going to uni

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8. **The (exaggerated) concept of "cancel culture" has also been normalised and evoke strong reaction from all sides.** Therefore it is common for young people, when people they have a connection to, are aligned to or aspire to are felt to be 'cancelled' to want to defend or talk about them even more.

It's important to note that these are just a few of the potential factors that may influence why young people are attracted to such views, and individual experiences and motivations may vary.

By understanding the reasons *WHY* people are attracted to aspirational misogyny, we can understand what will and won't work in addressing it in schools.

Educators know young people enough to know that entering into battle is never going to end well. If the young person is demonstrating aspirational misogyny in order to be different to how they believe they are expected to be, or to be controversial, arguing with them or trying to 'tell them' will only make them dig in deeper.

Society tends to see people in very binary terms, as either good or bad – great or terrible, safe or a threat. But, in reality, it is never that simple.

Andrew Tate's advice, for example, has included anti-smoking and drinking, being honest and polite and 'taking ownership of your own life and your mental health.' Separating out the unhealthy misogynistic views from the people, and the other views is always helpful.

▶ **Demonstrating nuance.** In your discussions, this can take the adversary nature out of the discussions, strengthen your argument, and also help role model nuanced, critical thinking in your young people.

▶ **Instead of judgement, show curiosity.** Often, young people will repeat the views they have heard from influencers without really thinking about them. Rather than reacting, asking them WHY they think that (in a curious, non-judgemental way) and to further expand their thinking so you can understand better, will help them contextualise their thinking and develop critical thinking in a non-confrontational way.

▶ **Explore the systemic reality not the bias.** Rather than focus on whether the belief is or isn't correct (therefore right or wrong), focus on how gendered roles have been embedded into our societal framework and therefore seem normalised.
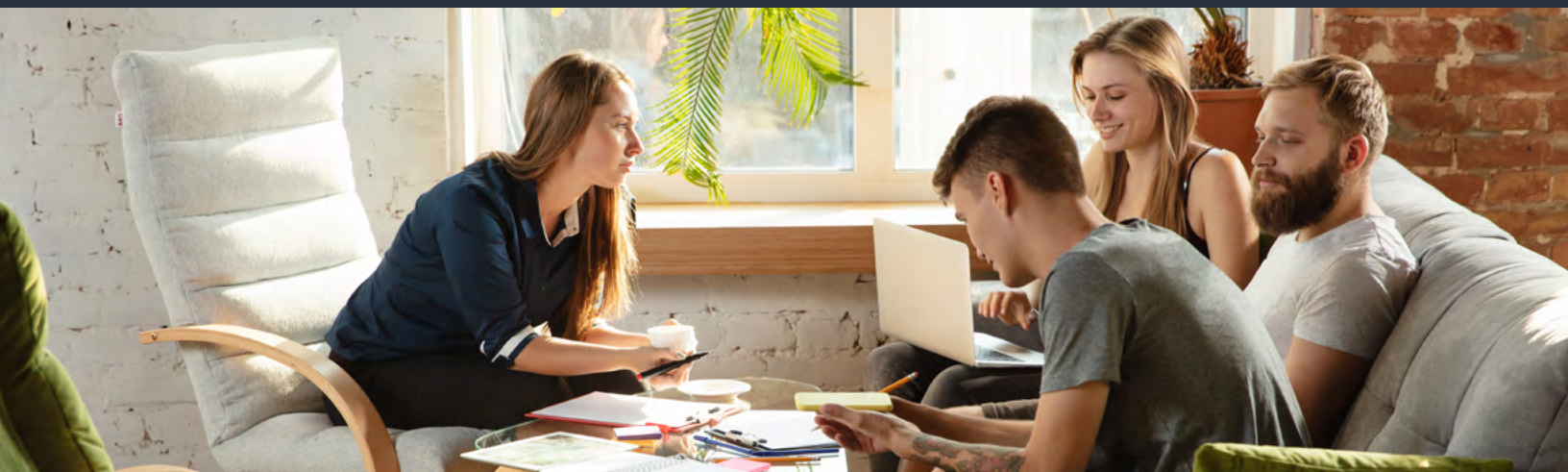
Freedom of Speech is very important, but so is accountability and learning to judge when is and isn't a time to offer our views unprompted. Similarly, in any organisation, people are entitled to believe and think whatever they would like, but we are not free to behave in any way we would like. It is key that young people can learn this differentiation and navigate it successfully before entering the workplace.

Help students by being explicit about expectations of behaviour (including when conversations may or may not be appropriate) in line with values of school rather than suggest there is a right or wrong way of thinking. Extra consideration should be given to being explicit about expected behaviours of those with positions of authority or power in the student body; for example sporting teams, prefects etc.

This is not a standalone step (as you will also go on to try to educate and develop thinking) but ultimately it is key to restrict inappropriate behaviours that do damage, and to encourage and reward positive behaviours. Some people in the school community may still hold these views, which is their right. Human nature, is that if you feel someone is trying to make you think or do something, you are more resistant. Therefore, we should focus our energy on addressing behaviour rather than opinion, and ensuring that all members of our community are able to feel safe, respected and valued.

STEP 4 – Leverage Those Influencers and Moments That Matter Within School

It is always tempting to have an assembly to address issues, or to focus them solely in PSHE or tutor time. But to impactfully change, we need to take the conversation to where students who are displaying aspirational misogyny feel comfortable, where they can be open to reflection and be vulnerable.

Given the attraction to these ideas normally comes from a sense of disenfranchisement with the expected norm, a sense of powerlessness and an attraction to being controversial, it is therefore unlikely that these conversations held in structured settings (such as lessons or assemblies) alone will be effective. There is some value in other students hearing the conversations however, but they are unlikely to change the behaviour of those young people you might want to target.

Instead, we need to think about where the power and influence moments are for these young people and utilise them. Examples include:

- Use your popular male staff to be explicit about their views and beliefs and what 'being a man' means to them – such as sports coaches and influential male members of staff.

- Engage your influential students to talk about why misogyny is not helpful to young people or society as a whole – especially those students who others look to as role models (not necessarily who we think SHOULD be role models).

- Deliver education and support to parents to help them have conversations positively and be intentional in their own influences.

- Embed opportunities to reflect the conversation in as many parts of the school as you can.

Schools are a micro-community and as such, a reflection of wider society. Therefore, it is both expected and unsurprising that, however inclusive we feel we would like to be, the starting point of a culture is the existing societal inequalities, biases and norms baked in.

Young people are deeply influenced in their views of the world and behaviours by their educational environment. They are influenced less by what they hear people say, and more by what they see people doing every day and the dynamics of the culture around them.

So to genuinely tackle aspirational misogyny, it is key to critically evaluate the unspoken rules and messaging in your school culture.

How to do this is specific to each school, but some general starting points and questions to think through include:

1. **How much do we educate Students?** It's important to educate students on the concept of gender equity and the harmful effects of misogynistic attitudes and unnecessary gendered societal roles. This should focus particularly in relation to their wellbeing and mental health, as well as the impact on each other. Teachers can use a variety of resources, such as books, videos, and guest speakers, to create awareness. This shouldn't just be in PSHE but in all areas of the curriculum.

2. **Do we unintentionally perpetuate unhealthy masculinity, femininity and gendered stereotypes?** Looking at the regular language, events and activities at school, as well as practicalities and practices such as uniform, assumptions and expectations can help us see where we are unknowingly reinforcing rigid views of gender. For example, do staff accept different levels of boisterousness as 'boys will be boys', are boarding houses or spaces decorated in overtly gendered ways, do staff profiles perpetuate gender norms and men=power, do informal school activities such as Christmas pantomimes have women dressed in skimpy outfits or school uniform, does sexualisation of young male teachers by students or staff get passed off as 'banter'.

3. **De we encourage EVERYONE to Speak Up (allyship) or put the burden on the person on the receiving end:** Rather than focussing that young women should be encouraged to speak up when they feel uncomfortable or when they experience sexism, this should be a shared accountability for all community members. You can and should embed a safe space for young women to share their experiences and offer support, but encouraging a withstander culture rather than a bystander mentality is more impactful.

4. **Do we teach Critical Thinking Skills about life and opinions rather that just the curriculum?** Critical thinking skills can help students understand how media and cultural messages can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes, as well as how to navigate working positively with those who have a different perspective or view to yourself.

5. **What Role Models do we provide?** Schools should provide a wide variety of role models that showcase a variety of ways to be successful and show all facets of being successful and do not just reinforce stereotypes. Provide young men with positive role models (through speakers, those you amplify in posters etc, those you celebrate and discuss) who display healthy masculinity and support gender equity. Secondly, do we celebrate those in our community who we also know don't behave appropriately (eg the First Rugby or Football Team, old boys etc), thus condoning the behaviour.

6. **Do we offer and monitor support take up?** Students who are experiencing sexism or gender-based violence should have access to support services. But, so should students who want to explore their masculinity and may be struggling with identity. Are there counsellors or support structures that those young men would feel comfortable going to (as opposed to all female teams for example) and is this explicitly promoted and encouraged equally to all students, irrespective of gender? Do we monitor take up to see if there is a group we believe is not accessing support?

7. **Do we encourage Respectful Relationships?** Schools can promote healthy relationships through embedding and rewarding empathy, respect, and positive communication skills in all areas of the school – from how staff communicate with each other, with students, between students and between parents and the school.

8. **How do we measure and evaluate Progress?** Schools should periodically evaluate their efforts to address misogyny and gender inequity by creating metrics that will enable them to take a temperature check. By implementing these measures, schools can create a safe and inclusive environment for all students, regardless of their gender.