The men behind the curtain

THE ANTI-FEMINIST BACKLASH *playbook* THAT EXPLOITS BOYS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

equimundo
CENTER FOR MASCULINITIES & SOCIAL JUSTICE

WHAT IS THE PLAYBOOK OF EXPLOITATIVE BACKLASH ACTORS?

Why and how "blacklash" sells

STEP 1
Find the "Boys in Crisis" Audience

Identify receptive demographics: Disaffected young men facing societal challenges.

Craft targeted outreach materials to lead them towards extreme content.

Build Community Around the Victim Narrative

Construct compelling narrative framing social changes as threats.

Create platforms for followers to gather, reinforcing the narrative.

STEP 2

Deeper Interaction and Indoctrination

Host interactive experiences to deepen engagement.

Moderate platforms to reinforce ideology and remove dissenting voices.

STEP 3

STEP 4

Monetization and Expansion

Introduce subscription models, sell branded merchandise, solicit donations.

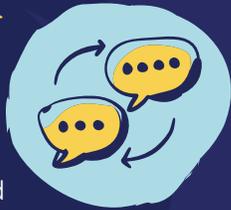Organize paid events and seminars, secure book deals and speaking engagements.

STEP 5

Political and Social Influence

Leverage platform to shape public opinion and mobilize followers.

Align with like-minded politicians for mutual influence and legitimacy.

Influencers transition from content creators to significant players in the political and social arena, impacting broader landscapes while profiting greatly.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Toward a new playbook

STEP 1

Promote Healthy Masculinity

Promote healthy masculinity free from harmful stereotypes.

Build a bigger tent for engaging boys.

Work with media and content creators to encourage inclusive, diverse storytelling about boyhood.

STEP 2

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Engage in open-ended conversations.

Hone boys' critical reasoning skills and digital literacy.

STEP 3

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Gender equality programming should consider strategies to account for backlash.

Foster supportive communities for boys to grow alongside peers.

STEP 4

Advance and achieve policy changes

Develop and promote access to critical online literacy.

Engage the health and education sectors.

STEP 5

Compel industry leaders in the technology sector and social media platforms to bolder action and harm reduction

Bolster trust and safety teams.

Incorporate safeguarding into algorithm design.

Demonetize and de-platform violent misogyny.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About Equimundo: Equimundo works globally to promote care by and for men and boys, reduce violence and inequity, and, in doing so, achieve well-being for all. This is achieved through a research-first approach that drives innovative solutions to shift norms, narratives, and policies in the United States and around the world.

About UNFPA: UNFPA is the United Nations' sexual and reproductive health agency. Our mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled. For more information, see: www.unfpa.org.

About the Global Boyhood Initiative: The Global Boyhood Initiative is a campaign coordinated by Equimundo and designed to support boys aged 4 to 13 and the adults in their lives with the resources they need to raise, teach, coach, and set an example for boys to become men who embrace healthier versions of manhood and gender equality.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the rise of organized anti-feminist backlash actors who exploit boys through financially motivated, digitally driven campaigns rooted in neo-misogyny. It explores how these actors operate and why boys are particularly vulnerable, as well as outlines strategies for prevention and response across sectors of society.

Specifically, this paper narrows its focus to a specific aspect of the backlash phenomenon: the organized groups, individuals, and influencers that not only persist but often thrive financially by promoting an intersectional neo-misogyny. It is not addressing sporadic or individual dissent but rather the deliberate and strategic efforts to galvanize individuals into a collective, oppositional stance. Its primary concern lies with how these organized entities target and exploit boys.

While not solely confined to the digital world, the available evidence shows it is predominantly through online organizing, advertising, and related channels that these groups reach out to and manipulate boys. This paper aims to outline and explore these dimensions,

setting the parameters for this analysis of organized backlash and its exploitation of male youth.

To do so, the paper begins by defining anti-feminist backlash and exploring why boys are particularly susceptible to its appeal in today's shifting social, economic, and technological landscape. Second, it outlines the strategic playbook used by backlash actors to recruit and monetize boys' engagement. The third section offers global examples that illustrate how the backlash manifests across national and cultural contexts, and the fourth assesses the broader societal consequences for boys themselves, gender equity, and democratic institutions. Finally, the paper offers a counter-strategy: a new playbook for prevention grounded in promoting healthy masculinities, fostering digital literacy, and engaging key sectors like education, tech, and health.

This paper draws on a mixed-methods approach that includes a literature review, Equimundo-led research, and a digital ethnography, setting the research agenda for understanding and responding to this urgent global challenge.

WHAT IS ANTI-FEMINIST

blacklash

AND WHY ARE BOYS SO SUSCEPTIBLE TO IT?

How organized misogynistic actors target and exploit boys

1

Even as it gains widespread use, the term "backlash" in the context of international gender equality efforts needs careful consideration. Its simplest connotations may inadvertently oversimplify the diverse range of reactions, motivations, and forces at play.

The concept of "anti-feminist backlash" has become increasingly prominent in the discourse on international gender equality. The term variously refers to everything from individual dissent to organized political resistance against the real or imagined advancements of women, adolescent girls, and feminist movements.

At its core, the notion of backlash presupposes a landscape where significant strides toward equality for women and girls have been made, prompting a reactive effort by those who disagree with and/or perceive themselves as disenfranchised by these shifts. Such backlash is, in the words of Susan Faludi's influential book on the topic, "a seemingly inevitable early frost to the brief flowerings of feminism."[1]

However, this interpretation may be an oversimplification. The utility and implications of the term "backlash," therefore, warrant a critical examination – is backlash indeed a response to real gains toward equality, is it the enduring structures of patriarchy in a new guise, both at once, or something altogether more sinister? Questions surrounding the term's validity are underscored by global events such as the rise of authoritarian leaders and the erosion of reproductive freedoms, which challenge the notion of a steadfast march toward equality.[2]

The question is how to consider whether what's happening is indeed a "backlash" against progressive gains in gender equality or simply the persistent, underlying currents of long-standing patriarchal systems and organized groups that speak for such views. "Erasing the complexity of politics," writes scholar David Paternotte, "[the term backlash] assumes that history has a direction."[3]

The mainstream understanding of "backlash" presupposes a landscape in which significant strides toward equality have been made. But is society really moving in the direction of equality?

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In the past decade, the world has undergone historic transformations marked by events such as climate change, the COVID pandemic, demographic shifts, and rapid technological advancements.[4] These occurrences have sparked significant social upheavals, reshaping the way the next generation perceives its future. Boys can see that men's roles in the workplace and in society are evolving, with changes in gender roles and norms that may challenge the gender status quo in their living spaces at the family and community levels.

Amidst these macro-level social, political, and economic changes, young men are often turning to the internet and finding community and belonging that speak to their unique identities, interests, and fears, seeking guidance through confusing times.[5] Yet many men and boys end up funneled into what has become known as the *manosphere*, a large, amorphous digital phenomenon that is sometimes connected to a broader, global antifeminist backlash movement, which swoops in with clear messages to help men and boys make sense of a changing world, particularly around gender and gender roles.[6]

It is true that in some countries, women, racialized minority men, immigrants, and other historically oppressed groups have made inroads into some of the domains of wealth and power that ethnic-majority men have historically dominated. For example, women owned 40% of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Nigeria as of 2023, highlighting their significant contribution to the country's economic growth and job creation.[7]

Additionally, women held 61% of seats in Rwanda's lower house of parliament as of mid-2024, the highest proportion globally and far surpassing the constitutional quota of 30% introduced in 2003.[8]

And yet across the globe, the middle class is experiencing stagnating or declining incomes, coupled with rising costs of living. This eroding financial stability has led to increased political discontent and support for radical political movements,[9] and young adults globally are confronting the reality that they may not achieve the same economic status as their parents. This anticipated downward mobility contributes to political polarization and a sense of disillusionment.

Men's incomes are on a decline in the United States, for instance, where inflation-adjusted incomes for the bottom 80% of US men have decreased; this is particularly true for the bottom 40% of men, who typically have less than a college education. These economic pressures are most pronounced among racialized minority men, but low-income and lower-middle-income men of all ethnic backgrounds are similarly affected.[10]

In Europe and the US, macroeconomic changes – such as technological advancements and automation, economies shifting toward investment and financial services, and the decline of union power – have affected labor force participation and male economic anxiety. A shift from traditionally male-dominated sectors like industry and manufacturing to sectors often associated with female employment (such as administrative, service, and care professions) reflects

These structural and normative changes have met other social shifts to produce a narrative that boys, men, and/or masculinity are in crisis.

a related trend: To boys and men brought up in a society telling them that they should – or need to – be the breadwinner for their family, some of these shifts might well lead to fear and anxiety. Equimundo's research in the US has found a strong association between men's sense of economic precarity and their belief that feminism "has gone too far."[11]

Around the world, anxiety and confusion around men and masculinity have pervaded public discourse. The "crisis" of men and boys continues to garner headlines in major news media. While much of this rhetoric of manhood in crisis is misdirected – often oversimplifying and generalizing masculinities as toxic, blaming women for men's losses, or focusing only on real challenges men face while ignoring women's ongoing inequalities – there are certainly many indicators of men's lives and struggles that deserve real, empathic, and human-centered attention.

Boys are falling behind in school in nearly 100 countries globally, while adult men are increasingly dropping out of work or not finding stable work during their prime working years,[12] overdosing and drinking themselves to death, all leading to further declines in life expectancy compared to women.[13]

Equimundo's *State of American Men 2023* report demonstrated growing loneliness among men, with 49% of the youngest men reporting thoughts of suicide in the previous week, disconnection from social support networks, and waning trust in political and public institutions writ large.[14] These trends require serious attention, not only because they offer fertile ground for backlash actors but also because boys and men deserve happiness and well-being as much as anyone and because families, communities, and societies do better when everyone within them does better.

The rhetoric of crisis can go too far, however, and produce too-easy scapegoating of women and minority groups facing intersectional oppression.

As Australian professor Michael Flood observes, the rhetoric around the masculinity crisis means that boys are sometimes misleadingly framed as the "new disadvantaged" and that masculinity is viewed as under siege as a result of feminist reforms.[15] The reality is that gender equality is not a zero-sum game – progress for women and girls does not mean loss for men and boys. However, it does require men to confront and let go of certain patriarchal privileges in order to help build more just and equitable societies, ones in which everyone – including men – can thrive and have their needs and vulnerabilities recognized.

Nevertheless, this binary "battle of the sexes" mentality is still pervasive in societies worldwide, and it remains a major challenge to achieving gender equality. It also ignores that patriarchal norms often do real harm to men and boys themselves by limiting their emotional expression, discouraging care-seeking, and confining them to rigid roles. Hypercompetitive workplaces, globalized capitalism, and economic inequalities push men into economic precarity, particularly lower-educated men of all ethnicities.

Rather than blame unjust economic policies (or the politicians and corporate leaders who perpetuate them), conflict, climate crises, or other sources of stress and economic inequality, many men facing new or chronic economic precarity are lured into blaming women and "others" (immigrants, minority ethnic groups, LGBTQ+ people, and the like) for these inequalities.[16]

Regardless of the shifts and trends in gender roles, stereotypes, and norms underway, many people continue to be disadvantaged across multiple socioeconomic dimensions: women, girls, and LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as racialized minority men and boys, those living subaltern masculinities – and some ethnic-majority men. Additionally, for all the changes in the labor market, women (and especially racialized minority women) remain significantly underrepresented in higher-paying jobs and continue to earn lower pay than men for the same work on average.[17] At the same time, many men are facing economic precarity and cannot find dignified, high-paying work, and this economic injustice must be addressed to help remove the fertile soil where backlash thrives.

A more apt term for the moment than "crisis" is "status threat." An essential root of backlash ideology is the perceived threat of loss of status among a privileged group (especially ethnic-majority, heterosexual boys and men).

Group-level status threat can be seen worldwide and at high levels of power, where voices resisting gender equality and human rights are, in fact, gaining ground across public and political arenas.

"Status threat" can coexist at the individual level when a single member of an advantaged group perceives challenges to their status and at the collective level when the identity group itself feels under threat. These forms of status threat can reinforce and amplify one another as individual slights are interpreted as part of a group-wide experience, and vice versa.

In the case of ethnic-majority boys and men experiencing threats to their privileges *as men*, scholarship shows a tendency to hyper-conform to in-group traits. The so-called "masculine overcompensation thesis" contends that men respond to threats to their privileged position in a gender order by *over*-demonstrating restrictive notions of masculinity.[18] All of this is made complicated by the fact that some men are, in fact, losing income, and with that, status.

To the extent that societies make advances in the direction of greater social equality and realization of human rights, one might expect most members of that society to celebrate such changes. The vast majority, after all, stand to benefit when resources and opportunities are more equally distributed.[19] If only it were that easy. In truth, powerful identity groups seldom celebrate what they perceive as their own obsolescence, even (or especially) when it is in the best interest of the majority.

Rather than celebrating social progress, they act out with "aggrieved entitlement" deriving from status threat.

Ethnic-majority, heterosexual boys and men sit right at the crux of this dynamic, to be certain, but status threat is not limited to this group. For example, historically marginalized men facing high levels of precarity due to systemic racism, discrimination, and structural barriers to economic success may also respond to a lack of power or status by overcompensating to meet hypermasculine norms.

Thus, the kinds of misogynist messaging that scapegoat women and gender-nonconforming individuals as the root of "the decline of men" persist in disadvantaged communities as well.[20]

It's imperative to acknowledge how systemic inequities severely affect these men's lives and foster feelings of frustration and helplessness. However, it's equally important to hold men accountable when this frustration and helplessness manifest – as they often do – as reactionary and anti-feminist views.[21]

Striking a balance between maintaining accountability and empathizing with the systemic issues these men face is crucial to addressing the root causes of their dissatisfaction.

This strategic invocation of traditional masculinity does not only emerge from individuals facing precarity or smaller identity groups, however. The landscape of global politics is increasingly marked by the same "aggrieved entitlement." Public figures around the world have exhibited masculinist ideologies, exemplified by strongman rhetoric and militarized violence embedded in policies to preserve power and authority to some degree, often in ways that align with the anxieties of ethnonationalists.[22]

Their litany of perceived threats includes advocacy for LGBTQI+ rights, feminism, immigration, social justice movements, and beyond. Often, they use these populations as scapegoats for political grievances and systemic corruption.[23] Such political posturing goes beyond mere rhetoric; it is a calculated strategy designed to resonate with those who long for a reassertion of traditional masculine authority in an evolving social landscape.[24] And it often plays into the real vulnerabilities of working-class or low-income men across ethnic groups who face genuine economic and employment challenges.

These examples show how a confluence of religious, nationalist, and patriarchal ideologies creates a complex challenge to gender equality efforts. Backlash against gender equality frequently intersects with other reactive ideologies, extending beyond the immediate scope of gender and into the broader realms of patriarchal conservatism. Religious fundamentalist movements often vehemently oppose gender equality, for instance, branding it as a symbol of moral decay and Westernization.[25]

These groups advocate a return to what they perceive as "natural," traditional societal structures, where gender roles are strictly demarcated and enforced. Ethnonationalist and neofascist movements have likewise incorporated antifeminist rhetoric into their platforms. While their core ideology may prioritize racial or ethnic narratives, the underlying agenda often includes a staunch opposition to feminist ideals.

This opposition is not solely a resistance to progress around gender equality but also a tool to advance their broader objectives of ethnic purity and social homogeneity. Moreover, there is a growing trend among these actors to intertwine religious conservatism with nationalist sentiments, thereby promoting a racialized vision of patriarchal, "traditional" family values. Such values are

So, where do boys come into the picture? Though resistance to gender equality can manifest at all levels of society, this report's specific concern is organized efforts to exploit and recruit boys into anti-feminist movements.

It is crucial to investigate why boys and young men are particularly vulnerable to reactionary masculinist and ethnonationalist rhetoric. Adolescence is a time when identity, values, and beliefs are still forming, making this age group especially impressionable. Additionally, the widespread use of digital spaces by young men amplifies their exposure to these ideas.

frequently conflated with authoritarian and antidemocratic principles, emphasizing a masculine dominance that serves their ideological ends.

In this context, scholar Raewyn Connell's concept of the *patriarchal dividend* is crucial, as it highlights how men, especially those in dominant racial or ethnic groups, benefit from the perpetuation of patriarchal structures. These groups not only resist feminist movements but also seek to maintain and enhance their own power and privilege by reinforcing gender hierarchies, which in turn, supports their broader social and political goals of dominance and control.[26]

In reviewing these trends, it is important not to paint them as a single, overarching, and organized anti-feminist, nationalist movement. While there is much exchange of tactics among these backlash groups, the one thing they have in common is the use of traditional masculinity and anti-feminist rhetoric to gain followers for financial or political gains. Although their stated end goals are deeply concerning, their most visible success lies in winning

elections and capitalizing on the real economic inequalities that also affect men.

Many men are facing economic crises and stresses, and they have reason to sense that precarity – just as many women do. All of this implies that pushing back against the backlash requires more than simply convincing men they are wrong – it also requires seeing the structural forces that drive economic as well as gender inequality.

Resistance to gender equality and broader social advancement is a multifaceted issue that permeates society. It manifests in the intimate confines of family homes, within the foundational institutions of community schools and workplaces, and across the influential realms of popular media, and it extends into the legal and political spheres. At the grassroots level, this resistance might emerge from boys and men who feel alienated by women's and adolescent girls' empowerment initiatives, which they perceive as exclusionary.[27] In more extreme cases, it escalates to organized insurrections, reflecting the complex, far-reaching nature of such opposition.[28]

Addressing the challenges boys face, such as loneliness and lack of support systems, involves active community participation, building stronger friendships, and respecting women and girls. This respect is essential to fostering positive relationships and inclusive environments. Also positively, recent trends and cultural movements have somewhat liberated boys from restrictive notions of masculinity, with non-heterosexual identities becoming less stigmatized and alternative masculinities gaining visibility in some societies.[29]

Unfortunately, the forces that limit men by promoting harmful ideas about women and reinforcing dominant forms of manhood remain more coordinated and have greater access to capital. The increasing polarization of discussions about boyhood, and its exploitation by extremist ideologues, are hindering efforts to find common ground and build crucial support networks. Findings from studies like the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) and the State of American Men indicate that progress on young men's views about

masculinity is either stagnant or regressing, highlighting the urgent need for continued advocacy and sustained interventions.[30]

A focus on men and masculinity is imperative in the digital age, as boys' state of precarity – marked by economic instability, educational disengagement, mental health struggles, and shifting gender expectations – makes them vulnerable to the appeal of reactionary movements that are highly coordinated and profitable. Boys and young men, even those with existing progressive views, are susceptible to polarizing messages around gender and identity as they search for communities of care and support to validate pain and frustration.[31]

Boys facing isolation and depression are increasingly being recruited by hate groups and far-right organizations fueling polarization around the world.[32] Ethnonationalist rhetoric, with its emphasis on "heritage," can similarly entice boys searching for a sense of belonging and purpose.

During adolescence, boys are especially open to external influences. Boys actively seek models of manhood to emulate at these ages, and the powerful allure of masculinist narratives can provide a comfortable, clear path in a world that otherwise feels increasingly complex and confusing.
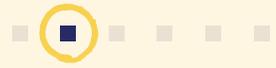
Such ideologies can prey on the insecurities inherent to the transition from boyhood to manhood, offering a seductive – albeit destructive – vision of empowerment. For boys and young men facing economic insecurity, many of the same actors also promise financial success, with political leaders and online influencers offering spurious pathways to financial gains and in-group belonging for "us" versus "them."

Understanding this pattern and vulnerability is vital not only for protecting young men from being co-opted into harmful patterns of behavior, but also for crafting effective counternarratives and actions that promote inclusivity, equality, and respect for diversity.

Supporting boys in developing identities rooted in healthy expressions of masculinity, mutual respect, and civic responsibility – rather than in dominance and exclusion – is good for boys themselves and is essential to advancing gender equality and shared responsibilities in families and communities. When boys are encouraged to move beyond norms of dominance and exclusion, they are better equipped to participate fully in building equitable societies and promoting health and rights for all. Yet too often, in place of these healthy expressions, exploitative backlash actors offer the opposite. Their seductive promises of purpose, identity, belonging, and potential income – all widely held aspects of masculine "success" – fill a vacuum of developmental needs for many young men and boys. As Christine Emba put it in her popular Washington Post editorial, "Young men everywhere [are] trying on new identities, many of them ugly, all gesturing toward a desire to belong."[33]

Definitions of key terms

Aggrieved entitlement

Aggrieved entitlement refers to a sense of frustration and resentment that arises when individuals, particularly those from dominant groups, feel that their traditional social privileges or status are being challenged or diminished. In gender studies, aggrieved entitlement is primarily associated with men who perceive that the benefits and privileges traditionally afforded to them solely based on their gender are being eroded.

The manosphere

The manosphere is an umbrella term that refers to a loose collection of interconnected internet forums, public figures, and communities, some of which promote hypermasculinity, misogyny, and opposition to feminism. Manosphere groups are heterogeneous; can vary from self-help tips to anti-feminism to more explicit, violent rhetoric toward women; and exist on multiple platforms as well as offline. However, they are united in male supremacist beliefs and often significantly cross-pollinate with right-wing extremist groups.[34] Though there are internal differences and conflicts within and between these groups and figures, each tends to abide by the red pill "philosophy," or the idea of awakening men to feminism's supposed misandry and brainwashing. It is also important to note that much of what happens in the manosphere is men seeking connections and friendship, or others with like interests.

Status threat

Status threat refers to the perception among some men that their traditional social standing is being undermined by societal changes, such as the advancement of gender equality and shifts in economic or cultural power dynamics. This perceived threat can lead to various compensatory behaviors aimed at reasserting traditional masculine roles and dominance.
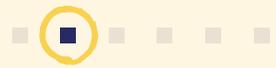
Masculinism or male supremacism

Masculinism or male supremacism is an ideology that advocates for the superiority of men over women and promotes the preservation or enhancement of men's status and power in society. This ideology is grounded in the belief that men are inherently superior to women in various aspects, such as intellect, strength, and leadership, and therefore should hold dominant positions in social, political, and economic spheres.

Precarity

Precarity refers to a condition of existence without predictability or security. It often involves unstable employment, lack of job security, inadequate income, and the absence of social safety nets. Precarity extends beyond economic instability, encompassing a broader sense of vulnerability and uncertainty in various aspects of life, including housing, health, and social relationships. Precarity is associated with increased exposure to risks, stress, and a diminished quality of life. The concept highlights the impact of systemic inequalities and the fragility of socioeconomic positions for individuals and groups. Gender theorist Judith Butler characterized precarity as a structural outcome of "failing social and economic networks of support" that exposes people to "injury, violence, and death." [36]

Men's rights activists (MRAs)

Men's rights activists (MRAs) emerged with the men's rights movement in the 1970s and its links with the women's liberation movement. Initially, these groups advocated for one another, recognizing the patriarchy's harmful impact on both men and women. Over time, however, MRA concerns over perceived social and institutional structures that discriminate against men and boys turned the blame toward feminism and, in turn, fanned the flames of the anti-feminist movement. Many common grievances for MRAs include family law (specifically child custody and alimony), reproductive rights and access, domestic violence against men, circumcision, conscription, and education policies.[35]

WHAT IS THE *playbook* OF EXPLOITATIVE BACKLASH ACTORS?

Why and how "backlash" sells online and offline

2

The backlash narrative has multiple incentives for organized, exploitative influencers who have mastered the art of leveraging boys' isolation for their own gain.

These influencers operate with a business model that exploits the vulnerabilities of young men by validating their feelings of disenfranchisement. With messaging affirming that these boys and men are indeed the "victims" of societal change, such groups misattribute the cause of their challenges to feminism.

Flipping the narrative to portray boys and men as the oppressed group relies on a zero-sum mentality: the misguided idea that women's liberation and girls' empowerment come at a direct cost to men's status and opportunities.

Within this framework, backlash is not just a reaction but also a tool these influencers leverage to position themselves as heroes or generals in a cultural war. Further, the growing market for and uptake of backlash narratives serve to justify the perceived validity of this framework.

The exploitative backlash playbook

This paper seeks to inform and guide those concerned for boys' well-being by dissecting the practices of backlash influencers. In this way, program designers, implementers, teachers, parents, and others can disrupt this exploitation as it's happening. For boys at different stages of indoctrination, diverse approaches may be necessary.

There is also a hope that seeing these practices for what they are – a money-making scheme exploiting very real adolescent confusions and questions – may dissolve some of these influencers' power as trusted figures or role models for many young men. Influencers or public figures who pursue this scheme want to be seen as avenging heroes for a victimized class of men, but in reality, they are hucksters (or, according to some scholars, racketeers). [37]

The challenge, of course, is that these figures hold large sway. In Equimundo's State of American Men 2023 survey, 20% of Gen Z men in the US reported that they trusted Andrew Tate (a misogynist influencer), while only 19% said they trusted Joe Biden (president of the United States). The influence these actors wield need not be seen as mysterious or confounding, however. To a great extent, Tate and his compatriots follow a series of steps (dubbed a "playbook" here) to turn young men's disillusionment into personal profit. This playbook is presented here in the abstract. While its particulars may shift from one influencer to another based on their cultural contexts, central issues, language, and other factors, these five steps describe the basic structure of the profit-driven exploitation of backlash actors targeting boys.

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Step 1: Find the "boys in crisis" audience

The influencer begins by identifying the demographics that are most likely to be receptive to their message. This may include boys and young men who have already developed worldviews of disaffection and disempowerment. But research suggests that this is rarely the starting point. In her book *Men Who Hate Women*, Laura Bates demonstrates how boys who wind up targeted by exploitative influencers often start out by searching topics such as "how to meet girls," "how to be more attractive," or "how to get over a breakup.[38]

These boys may be lonely and self-conscious, but they generally have not yet embraced virulent anti-feminist views. Influencers using strategic search engine optimization can capitalize on a well-intentioned search by a young man or a boy – for intimacy, a peer group, or information about a life need – to first catch their attention.

A boy who watches even one or two videos about workout plans or rebounding after a breakup will almost certainly, through recommender algorithms, be presented with increasingly extreme content for their third, fourth, and fifth videos.

EXAMPLE: Incel[39] narratives have permeated popular discourse through a process of "normiefication," where niche ideas, theories, and discursive practices gain greater reach outside of their native subcultural context to mainstream platforms.[40] For example, The New York Times reported in 2023 on the "looksmaxxing" trend exploding on TikTok; this term, with roots on incel message boards, attributes romantic success to the perceived genetic advantages held by tall, muscular men and asserts that "sex is a complicated game of persuasion and subterfuge, to be won through special tricks and hidden knowledge."[41]

Source: Teachingmensfashion. (2023, September 21). *How to looksmax – step-by-step guide* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQyWUj64NyQ

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Step 2: Build community around the "victim narrative"

The influencer constructs a compelling story that frames contemporary social changes as a direct threat to the status and identity of young men. This story is multifaceted, lamenting the erosion of "traditional" gender roles while simultaneously weaving in ethnonationalist themes that glorify a mythic past of cultural and ethnic purity. The narrative asserts that gender equality movements, LGBTQI+ rights, religious diversity, and/or multiculturalism are to blame for the disenfranchisement of the in-group.

The content uses emotionally charged language and imagery designed to provoke fear, anger, and a sense of urgency. Recognizable symbols, slogans, and branding are developed to give a visual identity to the narrative. This could be a logo, a specific color scheme, a flag, or a hand signal. The narrative is typically not passive;

it includes clear calls to action, encouraging followers to spread the word, participate in events, or engage in specific behaviors that affirm their allegiance to the cause.

Many manosphere influencers use in-group language that is a constantly evolving collection of terms, sometimes in response to new issues that emerge or in an attempt to subvert social media moderation efforts. There is even a manosphere wiki glossary dedicated to collecting the "common terms of art, neologisms, and memes used by men's rights activists, pick-up artists, Men Going Their Own Way, and other denizens of the manosphere."[42]

Importantly, however, given these terms' popularity and broader integration into the mainstream, using this language does not necessarily mean someone associates with the extreme movements that employ it. Rather, this language must be understood in the broader context of how and why it is being used.

EXAMPLE: Thumbnails and titles use language and imagery that tap into fear-based narratives using threat proliferation and threat solution.

Source: youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=KIG2O7_79r4

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Step 3: Deepen interaction and indoctrinate

An important step toward a profit model is the shift from solely broadcasting content to facilitating interactive experiences. An organized influencer might host live Q&A sessions, webinars, or meetups online, or begin hosting in-person speaking events and seminars. Direct interaction increases the most fervent participants' investment in the community.

Interviewees for Laura Bates' *Men Who Hate Women* spoke to how strictly the platforms are moderated to ensure the narrative remains uncontested, creating an echo chamber that validates and amplifies the group's ideology.[43] Dissenting voices are often removed or discredited, reinforcing the group's beliefs.

Followers are given specific tasks that reinforce their commitment to the cause, such as performing online activism, participating in offline events, or creating their own content that aligns with the movement. The influencer might implement systems to reward active participation, such as recognition in the community, access to exclusive content, or even rank within the group.

EXAMPLE: For many content creators and influencers, building audience loyalty depends on cultivating a sense of personal connection or dependence — a parasocial relationship in which followers look to them for guidance and validation. Once this sense of community is established, viewers may be invited to join private spaces, such as Discord servers, through comment threads or direct links. These migrations across platforms deepen engagement and intimacy, reinforced by Discord's advanced messaging and community-building features.

Step 4: Monetize and expand

At this stage, the influencer begins to capitalize financially on the loyal community they've cultivated, while simultaneously working to expand their influence. Here's how this step might go:

- **Subscription models:** The influencer introduces premium content that is accessible through paid subscriptions. This content is marketed as "exclusive," offering deeper insights, advanced knowledge, or more direct interaction with the influencer. These subscriptions create a steady revenue stream while also reinforcing subscribers' commitment to the movement.

- **Merchandising:** The creation and sale of branded merchandise is another revenue stream. This might include clothing, accessories, or other items featuring the movement's symbols or slogans. Merchandising serves the dual purpose of generating income and visually spreading the movement's message in the physical world.

- **Crowdfunding and donations:**
The influencer may also solicit donations for specific causes or general support. Crowdfunding campaigns can be tied to particular projects or events, giving followers a tangible goal to contribute toward. This not only raises funds but also deepens followers' emotional and financial investment in the cause.

- **Paid events and seminars:**
Organizing and hosting paid events, workshops, or online seminars can generate additional income. These events are generally marketed as opportunities for followers to gain exclusive knowledge, network with like-minded individuals,

or receive personal mentorship from the influencer.

- **Book deals and speaking engagements:** As the influencer's profile grows, they might secure book deals or be invited to speaking engagements, often for a fee. These opportunities not only provide income but also legitimize the influencer as an authority figure.

- **Social media monetization**: Platforms like YouTube, where content creators can earn money through ad revenue, memberships, and super chats during live streams, are utilized to their full potential. As the influencer's following grows, so does their earning potential on these platforms.

EXAMPLE: One of the best-known examples of this tactic is Andrew Tate's "The Real World" – formerly known as Hustlers University. His online course is sold as an "academy" where members pay a monthly membership fee in exchange for advice on how to make a passive income from several online industries. If the claims of 200,000 paid users of the course are true, at £40 a month, this would net Tate around £96 million a year.[44]

Step 5: Exert political capital and social influence

In this final step, the influencer leverages the now-monetized and expanded platform to exert political capital[45] and social influence. This phase is crucial in solidifying the movement's impact beyond its immediate community. The influencer uses their platform to shape

public opinion on key issues aligned with their ideology.

This can involve publishing opinion pieces, producing persuasive content, and engaging in social media campaigns designed to sway public sentiment. Influencers mobilize their audiences for political aims. For some, a key strategy is encouraging followers to participate

in political processes, such as voting, protesting, or lobbying.

The influencer might endorse specific candidates, policies, or causes that align with the movement's values, urging their community to support these initiatives actively. For others, anti-government stances or conspiracies proliferate in ways that undermine democratic order.

The influencer may align themselves with like-minded politicians or political parties, through which the influencer can gain more direct influence over policy and decision-making. These alliances can provide mutual benefits, with the influencer offering their platform for political messaging in return for policy actions that support their agenda.

While digital platforms are the primary medium, branching out to traditional media through interviews, TV appearances, or newspaper columns can expand the influencer's reach and lend additional legitimacy to their cause. Positioning themselves as thought leaders in their area of influence, these influencers might be invited to speak at conferences, participate in think tanks, or contribute to academic publications, further solidifying their status and influence.

Influencers who reach this stage are the ones who become boogeymen for parents and op-ed fodder for concerned authorities. The influencer has successfully transitioned from being a content creator and community leader to a significant player in the political and social arena. Their influence extends beyond their initial platform, impacting broader societal and political landscapes to dangerous ends, all while they profit greatly from it.

EXAMPLE: Popular manosphere influencer Jordan Peterson flew right-wing leaders from around the world to London in 2023, where they launched a full-scale attack on climate science.[46] The speakers, who were all part of Peterson's "think tank," Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, served as a collective mouthpiece for the views Peterson had already espoused: that the term "net zero" is a "conspiracy run by narcissistic poseurs" and that environmental scientists are peddling a "Great Climate Con."[47]

WHAT DOES THIS look like AROUND THE WORLD

Illustrative examples

3

The growing backlash against gender equality is not just a cultural or social issue: It has become a high-stakes political battleground that is reshaping policy and power structures worldwide. Across the globe, the rise of the manosphere – a network of online communities promoting misogynistic ideologies – plays a significant role in fueling this resistance. According to a 2025 UN Women report, one in four countries experienced a rollback in women's rights in 2024, driven by economic instability, political resistance, and the rapid spread of harmful narratives online.[48] The following section explores how this global trend, initially rooted in the US and UK, is playing out in different national and cultural contexts through specific examples of resistance to gender equality progress from around the world.

EXAMPLE: Exploring the Manosphere in English-Speaking Countries: Insights from the US, UK, and Australia

The term "manosphere" describes a loose collection of content, voices, narratives, groups, and spaces that focus on issues related to hegemonic masculinity, men's rights, and gender dynamics.

The English-language manosphere is diverse and includes a range of perspectives, from well-intentioned self-help tips to men's rights advocacy to more extreme, explicitly violent viewpoints.[49] Digital media and gender scholar Debbie Ging has mapped the loose confederacy of these groups and identified five key categories comprising its primary hubs: (1) men's rights activists (MRAs); (2) Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW); (3) pick-up artists (PUAs); (4) traditional Christian conservatives (TradCons); and (5) gamer/geek culture (only a subsection of the gamer/geek culture).[50]

Though there are internal differences and conflicts within and between the groups, each tends to abide by the red pill *"philosophy,"* or the idea of awakening men to feminism's supposed misandry and brainwashing.[51] This philosophy is a conceptual metaphor derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*; in the manosphere, taking the red pill reveals the true machinations of the "real" world and its harsh realities that remain largely hidden to the social majority. The red pill philosophy positions men as victims and promises an antidote to unjust social hierarchy.

In recent years, scholars tracking the spread of the manosphere found that the milder and older communities, such as MRAs and PUAs, are giving way to more extremist ones like involuntary celibates (incels) and MGTOW, with these newer communities receiving significant migratory influxes from users of the older ones.[52]

Incel sites, in particular, have inspired violence and several mass shootings. These shifts parallel the increased personalization of anti-feminist ideas online, where relative anonymity facilitates hostile and often illegal performances of masculinity,[53] while allowing individuals to express agreement with extreme views with impunity and without their friends and neighbors finding out.[54][55]

In constructing a sense of catastrophe and insecurity around "the crisis of masculinity," the manosphere offers a means through which their audiences can regain a sense of security and protection from this same malaise.[55]

Boys are thus spoon-fed an outlet for their disaffection: Feminism, advances in gender equality, and progressive social movements are to blame for the unjust sexual market, women's privilege, and men's supposed oppression and diminished status.[56][57]

Many of these influencers use bait-and switch tactics that normalize harmful gender narratives by blending them with content young men want, such as information on sports or investing advice. This creates a dynamic in which boys are drawn in by content that matches their interests, while inflammatory messages are used to grab their attention.

Simultaneously, the community offers emotional support and a sense of belonging, which helps them overlook the negative aspects.

While the "men's rights" movement has been expanding for some time, social media offers a much larger audience, and its most influential figures act as conduits into popular culture.[57]

What begin as harmless or innocuous searches like "how to get girls to like me" or "how to be rich" can be stepping stones to a web of content designed to validate frustration, provide a sense of support or community, and ultimately bolster shared identity around a theory of manhood that uses women and feminism as scapegoats for society's ills.[58]

Scholar Sophie Bjork-James further cautions that white men motivated to visit particular sites due to aggrieved manhood may be introduced to conspiracies (initially via memes or coded language) that frame their gender complaints as a result of an anti-white conspiracy, serving to racialize misogyny (and homophobia) while acting as recruitment streams into the online white nationalist movement.[59]

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These concerns are not limited to those young men already visiting sites in the manosphere. Mainstream search engines and algorithm logic are skewed and may perpetuate racial bias, and they can at times be manipulated to boost violent and hateful content – much of which contributes to or constitutes technology-facilitated gender-based violence.[60]

While manosphere subcultures are often dismissed as a "fringe" issue, Laura Bates cautions that these influencers are particularly adept at taking advantage of social media platform algorithms by using similar branding and lexicon, as well as search engine optimization – thus benefiting from cross-pollination and expanding their audience.[61] [62]

Amid the porous edges of the manosphere, many boys are unaware of specific manosphere communities but still absorb their ideologies through easily digestible memes and "lol-worthy" content. Thus, "fringe" ideas from the manosphere — that are often trivialized by older generations, community leaders, and policymakers — undergo a process of adaptation aided by technology and the manipulation of emotional and pseudo-scientific appeals to communicate misogynistic concepts and red pill ideology not just in the US, UK, and Australia but globally.[62]

EXAMPLE: Democratic Backsliding and Gendered Disinformation Campaigns in Brazil

Designed to alter public perception of female politicians' track records, as well as to discourage women from seeking political office, gendered disinformation campaigns have been used around the world against women political activists and candidates. In Brazil, for example, gendered disinformation is proliferating at a rapid pace, contributing to both democratic backsliding and reversals of progress on gender equality.

Under the former presidency, Brazil experienced a deterioration of democratic principles that was exacerbated by human rights violations, racial inequality, and strongman politics leveraging hypermasculine narratives as a tool to project power.[63] Gendered disinformation became a key tool for the far-right administration to consolidate power by attacking female activists and journalists who criticized its policies, and by sowing political fissures through campaigns to discredit and ban gender and sexuality education, bolstered by digital harassment and intimidation tactics on a mass scale.[64]

Forensic analysis from #ShePersisted, an organization producing original research on gendered disinformation and online abuse, found that gendered attacks and disinformation were most prevalent during the presidency of the Liberal Party's term from 2019-2023, fueled by the president's statements as well as those of his far-right supporters and allies.[65] Attack lines targeting the woman's abilities, intelligence, and reputation in relation to her profession comprised 75% of the gendered attacks on YouTube comments; accusing women of being traitors, anti-national, or anti-government comprised 60% of the gendered attacks on Facebook, 31% on X, and 15% on YouTube comments. These posts labeled the targets as *"comunista"* (communist) or *"bandido"* (bandit) to portray them as adversaries of the state.

Weaponizing social media against women leaders and journalists with gendered disinformation and hate is one of the most effective mechanisms deployed to erode democratic institutions, divide social groups, exercise foreign influence, and support the growth of transnational far-right movements.[66] Attacks that aim to undermine women leaders reach millions on a mass scale, and represent an early warning of democratic backsliding; in countries like Hungary, Tunisia, and India, coordinated strategies have effectively used digital platforms to undermine democracy. Brazil is a clear case of backlash movements weaponizing social media to fuel anti-gender sentiments, leading to the deterioration of democratic principles and the calcification oft masculine norms defining the idealized notion of man by dominance, aggression, and emotional repression.[67]

EXAMPLE: The Manosphere and Gendered Disinformation in Kenya

The growth of the manosphere in Kenya is escalating alongside the increasing use of social media in the country.[68] Despite its relatively low number of users on X (1.8 million), Kenya was consistently in the top 10 countries globally using known manosphere words and phrases (in English) across the platform in 2023.[69] Influencers are following similar models as the US/UK manosphere, repackaging old gender stereotypes as new revelations and positioning themselves as truth-tellers in what they perceive as a "gynocentric" world.

The red pill ideology also translates; the idea that Kenyan men are now disadvantaged by gender politics and need to reclaim power is gaining traction within men's rights communities in Kenya.[70] Additionally, popular Kenyan influencers such as Andrew Kibe and Eric Amunga promote misogynistic and derogatory rhetoric and perpetuate hate speech, identity-based attacks, and disinformation.[71]

The manosphere's impact in Kenya is evidenced by the growing rates of gendered disinformation and technology-facilitated gender-based violence. In 2024, UNFPA Kenya found that 90% of university students had witnessed forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (including cyberstalking, doxing, revenge porn, and hate speech), while 39% had experienced it personally.[72] Controversial and hateful content, which can boost influencers' careers, is frequently created and shared – specifically focusing on anti-feminism and attacks on women's reproductive health choices, women in positions of power, and women running for political posts (particularly during election periods, when female political aspirants face harassment and vilification for "pushing the female agenda").

These attacks, often spread anonymously through platforms like WhatsApp in Kenya with "Forwarded as Received" titles, aim to discredit and undermine female politicians, ultimately discouraging women from seeking political careers or leadership roles.[73] The lack of repercussions further enables the continued spread of misinformation and harassment against women in Kenya's political and public spheres.

EXAMPLE: Men's Rights and Brahminical Patriarchy in India

Men's rights groups in India, while diverse in their composition, share a common grievance against what they perceive as the legal system's bias against men.

The emergence of men's rights activists in India, dating back to the early 1990s, marks a significant countermovement in response to legal reforms perceived as favoring women, particularly in the domains of domestic violence and dowry laws. This movement initially crystallized around forums like the Akhil Bharatiya Patni Atyachar Virodhi Sangh (All India Forum Against Torture of Husbands), and it has evolved into a significant social force under banners such as the Save Indian Family Foundation (SIFF). These groups have not only grown in number but also expanded their methods of engagement, shifting from solitary actions to well-organized online campaigns and public demonstrations.[74]

Their critique centers around laws on marriage and domestic violence, contending that these laws unduly favor women and victimize men. They argue for gender neutrality in legal frameworks, challenging the conventional understanding of gender roles and protection within the Indian Constitution.

The movement's trajectory from fringe activism to a more vocal and visible presence in public discourse mirrors early men's rights movements in the United States, where an initial questioning of gender norms gradually shifted to a more pronounced anti-feminist stance.

Parallel to the rise of MRAs, the online space in India has become a significant arena for gender discourse, particularly on social media platforms like X and Facebook.

Women in public and political roles face widespread online abuse, ranging from subtle trolling to overt threats. This abuse is part of a broader trend of opposing feminism and gender equality, with narratives often portraying men as victims of a societal shift toward women's rights. These online activities not only reflect the manosphere's standpoints but also contribute to shaping public opinion and societal attitudes on gender equality.[75]

The manosphere's opposition to gender equality and feminism in India manifests in various complex ways, intertwining cultural, religious, and gender narratives. These groups often justify gender inequality under the guise of protecting religious sentiments, reflecting a broader context of Brahminical patriarchy that interweaves caste and gender oppression.

In their denial of the validity of gender equality, these groups claim that women already have sufficient rights and that feminist demands are baseless or unreasonable. This stance is not merely a rejection

of feminist principles but also a reflection of deeply rooted societal structures that have historically marginalized women and girls, particularly those from lower-caste backgrounds.[76]

Coordinated backlash efforts are becoming increasingly evident in the targeting of prominent female political figures with sexual harassment and abuse. Globally, trolling has become embedded in the fabric of political life, but perhaps nowhere more than in India, where critics accuse the ruling party of operating a "troll army" leading to digital and in-person threats of gender-based violence.[77]

In this complex context, boys in India are growing up in an environment rife with conflicting and intersecting messages about religion, identity, gender roles, and equality.

They are exposed to narratives of male victimhood and anti-feminist rhetoric, while also observing a genuine societal push toward gender equality, which itself is co-opted for Hindu nationalist ends by the ruling party. This jumble of conflicting realities is hard for any person to parse, let alone adolescent boys, who are in a critical phase of identity formation and developing their understanding of gender relations.

EXAMPLE: Rise of the "Germanosphere"

Across Europe, the narratives and trends of the English-language manosphere are being translated to diverse contexts and languages, reshaping how masculinist ideologies are consumed and reproduced locally. In Germany, for example, this has given rise to the so-called "Germanosphere," a network of creators and audiences active on YouTube and other audiovisual platforms where ideological messages are closely linked with commercial services.[78] Despite relatively low membership numbers in specific groups, the structure of the German manosphere mirrors its US/UK counterpart, including men's rights activists, pick-up artists, incels, Men Going Their Own Way, and "redpillers." These categories provide the framework for content that mixes reactionary politics with themes of male self-improvement, resonating with viewers navigating personal or societal discontent.

A 2021 European Commission report underscored how such ideologies are adapting to national and linguistic contexts by mapping the spread of incel discourse across Europe. In Germany, qualitative analysis of incel comments revealed racialized perceptions of desirability, with incels of color expressing that they are unfavorably compared to the so-called "Aryan Chad" and voicing beliefs such as "German girls hate ethnics."[79] This example highlights how the German-language manosphere not only replicates the ideological contours of its English-language counterpart but also incorporates localized racial and historical dynamics. On audiovisual platforms, these ideas are often packaged with commercial products like dating courses or lifestyle coaching, blurring the boundaries between ideology, identity, and consumerism while algorithmically reinforcing exclusionary narratives.

WHAT ARE THE (implications) ACROSS SOCIETY?

What this business model actually produces

4

The impacts of growing backlash narratives are significant and far-ranging, occurring across various sectors and geographies. From the individual to societal levels, rollbacks on progress made toward gender equality and women's rights can fuel de-democratization, stoke anti-LGBTQA+ sentiment, undermine efforts to end sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence, and negatively impact the health and well-being of boys themselves.

At the same time, backlash actors are able to capitalize on extreme narratives and business models to consolidate power and profit.

Impact for influencers: profit, status, influence, and attention

Influencers who engage in exploitative business models typically reap a variety of benefits that reinforce their activities. Most simply, they earn **profit**. At the same time, social media companies reap the benefits from the growth in engagement, thus lacking an incentive to meaningfully regulate the platforms. As this report has discussed, these influencers monetize their platforms through advertising revenue, sponsored posts, premium subscription services, the sale of branded merchandise, and more.

These influencers' financial success is directly tied to their ability to maintain and grow their audience, driving them to continuously refine their tactics to keep followers engaged and willing to spend money. As their following expands, influencers gain a significant **status**

within their community, often elevated to thought leaders or champions of their cause. This status is bolstered by the echo chambers they create, which validate and amplify their views, giving them a position of authority and influence over their audience.

Successful influencers also gain a **platform** that extends across multiple media channels. This broad reach allows them to disseminate their message widely and quickly, often outpacing the ability of counter-messaging or fact-checking efforts to keep up.[80] The nature of the content can lead to notoriety, drawing attention from media, critics, and sometimes law enforcement.

Infamy furthers their narrative, as they often portray any opposition or criticism as evidence of a societal bias against them, which can attract a certain audience that feels similarly marginalized.

Impact for boys: a very high toll – including increased isolation and negative health outcomes – in exchange for an initial sense of belonging

Boys, particularly in their formative years, are seeking identity and a sense of **belonging**. Influencers often provide a compelling narrative that resonates with the uncertainties and challenges young men face, offering them a community where they feel understood and accepted. This sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose is a very powerful driver and outcome for boys, and the international gender equality community needs to take it seriously.

The State of American Men study found, for instance, that American men who held the most rigid beliefs about patriarchal gender roles and norms *were also the men who reported the greatest sense of life purpose*.[81] Research is increasingly showing that backlash and neo-misogynist messages provide a much more comfortable worldview (or *ontological security*) than messages of equality, feminism, and social progress.

But boys pay a heavy price in several dimensions for this sense of belonging and security. As boys become more involved in these online communities, they may withdraw from real-life interactions, leading paradoxically to increases in new forms of the **social isolation** that brought them to these spaces in the first place and, ultimately, aggravating rather than alleviating their loneliness.[82] Their social networks may become less diverse and focus specifically on their corner of the manosphere.

The adoption of divisive ideologies can strain relationships with family and friends who do not share the same beliefs, leading to conflicts and potential estrangement. The us-versus-them narrative can erode boys' capacity for empathy, instill a sense of **anger**, and make it harder for them to understand and care about the perspectives and experiences of others, particularly those from different backgrounds or with different viewpoints.

Additionally, the framing of traditional educational institutions as part of the "problem" can lead boys to **disengage from formal education**, limiting their future opportunities and ability to critically engage with diverse ideas.[83] The constant exposure to extremist ideologies can normalize radical views. In a minority of cases, it may also lead to **radicalization**, where boys may be compelled to act out these ideologies in harmful ways, including cyberbullying and online harassment (among other forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence)[84] or even physical violence.[85]

It's important to stress how data show that men who adhere to the tenets of an emotionally restrictive, dominance-focused, heteronormative version of manhood – the kind most often preferred by backlash influencers – are more likely to harm not only others but also themselves, exhibiting greater drug and alcohol abuse, worse mental health, greater suicidal ideation, and more experiences of violence themselves.[86]

It is also fair to say that while there have been global efforts to create new social spaces and empowerment for girls, the same has not happened for boys in terms of social scripts about what new models of manhood look like. In this absence, these harmful actors have entered.

Impact for girls and women: the persistence or resurgence of discrimination and violence, all while being gaslit with rhetoric claiming they are the new advantaged class

The exploitative influencer business model can have significant detrimental effects on women and girls, both directly and indirectly. The rhetoric can incite

targeted attacks against women, leading to safety concerns in both public and private spaces – online and offline – and requiring that women take additional precautions in their daily lives.

The propagation of misogynistic ideologies can embolden and justify aggressive behaviors toward women and girls, leading to an increase in **harassment** (both online and offline) as well as **physical violence**. Additionally, influencers often target feminist achievements, attempting to roll back progress on women's rights. This can affect policy and societal attitudes, making it more difficult for women and girls to gain equal opportunities and fair treatment.

As extremist misogynistic ideas are pushed into mainstream discourse, there's a risk that **sexist attitudes** become more normalized, affecting how women and girls are viewed and treated in society. The constant portrayal of women as "lesser" or "the enemy" can have severe psychological effects, leading to issues such as diminished self-esteem, body image issues, and increased stress and anxiety.

The portrayal of traditional gender roles as the ideal can influence young girls' aspirations and confidence, impacting their future choices and the way they view their potential. By undermining gender equality initiatives, these influencers can contribute to persistent **wage gaps** and the glass ceiling, making it harder for women to advance in their careers and achieve economic independence. Young girls may also be discouraged from pursuing certain

educational paths or careers due to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the devaluation of women's contributions in specific fields. The model often portrays female leaders negatively, which can discourage women and girls from seeking leadership roles and undermine the authority of those who do.

Adding to this, the global environment is increasingly hostile toward human rights defenders, particularly those advancing gender equality. In 2024, nearly one-quarter of governments worldwide reported a backlash against women's rights – including reduced protections, funding cuts, and rising discrimination – creating an even more perilous landscape for advocates on the front lines.[87] This backlash translates to heightened risks for human rights defenders, who now confront daily harassment, threats, violence, and even death as they strive to uphold fundamental rights and challenge regressive norms.[88] Such repression not only silences critical voices but also impairs collective capacity to resist and reverse the erosion of women's rights.

Impact for racialized minorities: bombardment with hostility and resurgent discrimination

These influencers often spread narratives that **stigmatize racialized and religious minorities**, framing them as outsiders or threats to social cohesion. This can lead to increased **discrimination** in various facets of life, including employment, education, and within the justice system.[89]

The rhetoric can embolden people to commit acts of **violence** against

minorities, leading to an increase in hate crimes. These actions not only cause immediate harm but also instill widespread fear in these communities. Constant exposure to hostile messages and the threat of violence can cause chronic **stress, anxiety, and trauma** for people within racialized minority communities, affecting mental health and overall well-being.

Narratives that blame racialized minorities for economic problems can lead to their **exclusion** from economic opportunities, widening inequality and perpetuating poverty within these communities. For racialized minority youth, these narratives can distort self-perception, generating identity conflicts and a **sense of alienation** from broader society.

Addressing the negative impacts on racialized minorities requires active counternarratives, strong community support systems, legal protections, and policies that foster diversity and inclusion. It is also necessary to promote intercultural dialogue and education to dismantle prejudices and build bridges between communities to embrace the value of diversity.

Impact for the LGBTQI+ community: the scaling back of rights, risk of violence, and estrangement from support networks

The exploitative influencer business model often involves spreading narratives hostile to LGBTQIA+ people, which can have serious implications.

These influencers can perpetuate stereotypes and misinformation, helping normalize discrimination and **reinforce social prejudices**.

Influencers with large followings can influence public opinion and political will, which could lead to support for **policies that discriminate against LGBTQI+ rights**, such as those regarding marriage, adoption, and anti-discrimination protections. Influencer rhetoric can also incite violence against these communities, leading to physical assaults, hate crimes, and in some cases, **homicide**.

People influenced by these narratives may become less supportive of LGBTQI+ loved ones, leading to estrangement and a lack of crucial support networks. Addressing these impacts involves active advocacy and creating affirming spaces that celebrate LGBTQI+ identities. It also requires legal protections, mental health resources, and community support to counter the negative influence of such exploitative influencers and promote a culture of acceptance and respect.

Impact for society: threats to fundamental democratic principles and institutions

Influencers peddling divisive and extremist ideologies can undermine the fundamental democratic principles of equality, freedom of speech, and **rule of law** by promoting authoritarianism and intolerance. The us-versus-them narratives can create deep social divides, **eroding the social solidarity** essential for a functioning democracy.

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When citizens are divided and pitted against each other, the collective ability to address common issues is weakened. Spreading conspiracy theories and misinformation can lead to widespread **distrust** in key democratic institutions, including the media, judiciary, and electoral processes. This skepticism can reduce public participation in democracy and weaken democratic governance, national security, and peacebuilding.

Influencers with large followings can exert pressure on policymakers, which can lead to **legislation** that reflects extremist views rather than the public good, thereby distorting the policymaking process. Other influencers may pursue an anti-political stance, rejecting government legislative systems, and can sway public opinion with disinformation campaigns, particularly around election outcomes and the democratic process. Such manipulation can delegitimize election results and destabilize political systems.

As these influencers often collaborate across borders, their impact can contribute to a **global trend of democratic backsliding**, where democratic norms and institutions are weakened worldwide.

WHAT can be DONE?

Toward a new Playbook

5

TOWARD A HEALTHY, AUTHENTIC CONNECTION PLAYBOOK FOR BOYS AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM

The goal of raising awareness about the exploitative influencers' playbook is to reveal the true mechanics behind the backlash narrative's seductive façade. In the harsh light of day, this model should be recognized for what it is and rightly rejected. By understanding these movements' playbook, individuals and communities can better support boys in developing a more nuanced and healthy understanding of masculinity and societal change. But simply knowing the influencers' tactics isn't tantamount to transforming the sense of isolation and confusion that makes boys susceptible to recruitment in the first place.

Contending with the power and scale of the backlash to gender equality will require a large-scale, coordinated effort to shift the narrative, one that involves a diverse array of partners across multiple sectors, including academia, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), public policy and law, and crucially, the technology field. Cross-sector efforts are necessary, as those working in the masculinities and gender space should continue to build capacity around how various tech platforms work, how they are run, and how to partner effectively.

In recent years, the discourse of men's *needs* has sometimes replaced the discourse of men's *rights* as a more nuanced form of backlash. Injured masculinity and vulnerable men with unmet needs are often framed as a men's health problem that needs to be addressed.[90] To distinguish these spaces and have lasting impact, initiatives and responses to the idea of "men in crisis" must be situated within feminist frameworks, and solutions must be structural and long term.

Unlike the exploitative influencer playbook, the following steps do not follow a sequence. In this case, all of these steps – and more – should be taken simultaneously from an ecological systems perspective.

Step 1: Promote healthy masculinities and directly communicate how boys and men can see their stake and benefit in it

Promote concepts of masculinity that are healthy, are free from harmful stereotypes, and find collective liberation with feminist movements – deliberately helping boys and men see how they benefit. In recent years, there has been increasing visibility of alternative masculinities and a greater understanding of how to teach this concretely.[91] One
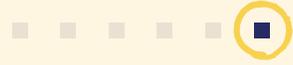
example is the positive psychology *positive masculinity paradigm*, which focuses on strengths and adopting a wider definition of masculinity – which has traditionally been viewed as the antithesis of femininity – to include emotional vulnerability and help-seeking.[92] This work involves the complex balancing act of helping men and boys see areas in which they hold more power and unfair advantages, while also helping them see how they too benefit from more gender-equitable homes, relationships, and workplaces. When men share equally in care, connection, and decision-making, they experience healthier relationships, greater emotional well-being, and more fulfilling lives.

Build a bigger tent for engaging young men and boys. Few existing progressive social movements have engaged young men and boys in large numbers, particularly outside urban areas. Considering the diversity of their identities and experiences, it would be unlikely for any single force or message to speak to a majority of them. But their low levels of participation in any of these movements suggest more needs to be done to understand, motivate, and engage boys and young men. This work must listen to and incorporate their needs, often done together and in dialogue with girls and young women. Programs and initiatives working with boys and young men should invest time, resources, and strategies to create spaces for belonging and psychological safety.

Work with media and content creators to encourage inclusive, diverse storytelling about boyhood that presents boys in positive ways.

Media makers and storytellers should avoid gratuitous violence, show boys asking for help, and develop storylines of male friendships as models for sharing emotions and supporting each other, as well as calling out peers for bullying or violent behavior rather than portraying men as bystanders.[93] Some examples include books like bell hooks' *Be Boy Buzz* and Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*; movies like *The Mask You Live In*; and podcasts like *Breaking the Boycode*.

Step 2: Listen first and foster critical thinking

Listen first. Adults in boys' lives should start conversations from the idea that boys are receiving certain backlash narratives through comedic content designed for maximum laughs rather than indoctrination. Other content in this space, like specious advice about money, dating, or politics, makes boys feel like they have knowledge about how the world really works – and teaches them how to take advantage of that insight. Engaging in an open-ended, nonjudgmental conversation about the content can lead to recognizing a boy's strengths and healthy interests, which is key to further developing confidence and critical thinking skills.

Hone boys' critical reasoning skills and digital literacy. Prohibition or "device denial" as the only solution to addressing manosphere influencers may, in fact, exacerbate boys' isolation, as restrictive approaches can be perceived as intrusive and send boys further down the rabbit hole, unwilling to engage in conversation. Instead, parents and
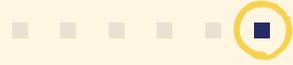
caregivers should familiarize themselves with the sites and forums their sons are frequenting, ask what they like about the content, and then try to redirect healthy interest in a subject to a safer or more appropriate platform or resource.[94]

Future programs should be structured to be responsive and adaptable to ongoing technological advancements. They should help boys identify both the positive and negative aspects of influencers and help to separate the two. They should also focus on supporting boys in questioning and recognizing issues of patriarchy and cultural or social norms that are harmful to themselves and others, as well as help them engage and become supporters of change.

Step 3: Design gender equality and violence prevention programming with much greater awareness of boys' online worlds and greater attention to how the violence they experience is related to the violence they often use

For gender equality programming, consider strategies to account for backlash. Further research is needed on intervention design, diverse analyses, and contextualized strategies for countering backlash, from the local to global levels. It is critical to broaden the understanding of different modes of backlash in relation to perceptions of and feelings about gender and progress, deconstructing the intersecting gendered, racialized, and classed dynamics of othering narratives, including their deployment of resentment and anxiety.

Specifically, it is imperative to recognize how online influencers have been effective, including their ability to scale messaging and define strong "in-group" community buy-in. If movements toward justice and equity fail to identify effective messaging and provide concrete avenues to belonging and care for men, including through government policies and economic security measures, men will continue to turn to these exploitative backlash actors.

Foster supportive communities for boys to grow alongside peers. Adults and institutions serving boys should cultivate supportive communities in which boys can openly discuss experiences, challenges, and successes. These spaces should encourage positive peer influence and discourage unhealthy behaviors through community-based spaces where boys can share skills, discuss personal problems, address mental health concerns, and receive peer support. Any strategy that seeks to make social change around gender equity, misogyny, or men's well-being cannot overlook the necessity of addressing boys' online lives, as movements to end violence have largely done until recently.

Step 4: Advance and achieve policy changes

Develop and promote access to critical digital literacy. Schools and governments should evaluate the extent to which all children have access to different forms of technological tools, and act accordingly to promote equal access to digital citizenship. Policymakers should work with educational institutions
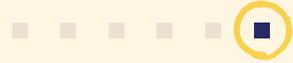
to mainstream gender equality in technology use through curricula to ensure the equal development of boys' and girls' digital access and information. Digital literacy is also essential to promote critical thinking and protect children from cyberbullying and extremist recruitment, given children's social and digital lives are increasingly interlinked.[95]

Engage the health and education sectors. Health providers need to provide access to support for boys that is male-friendly, as healthcare systems can often reinforce traditional gender roles; this is associated with worse outcomes, such as lower help-seeking behavior, underdiagnosis of mental health issues, and higher rates of substance abuse and suicide.[96]

Men's distinct health risk profile shows the need for gender-specific prevention and intervention approaches, considering that the health sector is often poorly attuned to men's and boys' specific mental health concerns and their need to overcome pervasive societal attitudes and self-stigma to access available services.

The health and education sectors should continue to identify and support ways to promote in-school, after-school, mental health, and sports programs for young men to engage meaningfully in their communities and learn critical life and healthy relationship skills, including comprehensive sexuality education.[97]

Elevate online misogyny as a threat to democracy and human rights. Online misogyny has multifaceted consequences for democracy, human rights, and societal well-being. Those working to bolster

democratic principles and values, as well as curb the spread of authoritarianism globally, also need to collaborate with young men and empower them to identify and recognize forms of masculinity that underpin many right-wing extremist recruitment efforts. Governments, civil society, and philanthropy should demand accountability from digital platforms and support coordinated solutions across borders and political lines.

Step 5: Compel industry leaders in the technology sector and social media platforms to undertake bolder action and harm reduction

Bolster trust and safety teams. These teams should work to limit the proliferation of violent, extreme, and misogynistic content online. Content moderation tools developed by the technology industry should be continuously tested and scrutinized, taking into account a gender and human rights perspective, and be part of a cross-sector and multi-stakeholder dialogue. Advocacy should also focus on lobbying tech companies to improve their reporting mechanisms and ensure they have a survivor-centered approach, as well as ensuring their compliance with global and national protections against technology-facilitated gender-based violence through the safe and ethical use of technology.[98]

Incorporate safeguarding into algorithm design. Greater transparency is needed in the use of algorithmic recommendation systems, which are increasingly adopting artificial intelligence

and machine learning tools to shape the content boys are seeing and engaging with online. Users should be given greater control over what they see on their own feeds in order to guard against the dangers of microtargeting, content optimization, and behavioral experiments conducted by platforms themselves.[99]

Demonetize and deplatform violent misogyny. The monetization of misogynistic and extreme rhetoric must be addressed to disincentivize content creators from profiting off of harmful norm creation and boys' vulnerabilities. Many influencers are motivated by the potential for earnings through advertising, sponsorships, and viewer donations. Cutting off these revenue streams discourages the production of harmful content.

Many social media platforms have community guidelines that prohibit hate speech, including misogyny, but safety mechanisms often fail to account for repeated offenders of technology-facilitated gender-based violence using pseudonyms and fake accounts, hiding behind the safety net of anonymity.[100] Deplatforming those who violate these guidelines reinforces the importance of maintaining a respectful and safe online environment.[101]

In Sum

There is no simple solution to addressing this multifaceted phenomenon. It requires an ecological approach that encompasses all potential factors – social, economic, environmental, health (both physical and mental), and structural.

Collaborating across sectors and borders to create the most strategic pathways for boys to embody healthier versions of masculinity from early ages – such as the desire to be connected, the need for deeper relationships, a willingness to discuss mental health, and a questioning of the "Man Box"[102] – ultimately contributes to narrative and cultural change on a global scale, where gender equality is understood as a net positive for all of us, and men's violence is no longer the norm.

Harmful masculine norms that shape men's and boys' lives across families, schools, sports, and community spaces are increasingly amplified online, depriving young men of more caring alternatives and fueling backsliding on feminist progress. Addressing this global anti-feminist backlash requires not only resisting regressive forces but also having a global conversation about what caring, connected, equitable manhood can and should be. To make further strides toward full equality and human rights for women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals, men's commitment to equality is paramount and cannot be assumed.

Crucially, this does not mean inventing new models of manhood from scratch, but rather calling attention to and building upon the many men who already live as caring, emotionally connected, cooperative partners in the struggle for equality. Supporting more men and boys to confidently determine their identities in this way is vital – not only for sustaining feminist gains but for the good of all.

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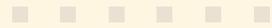
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