



Gendering Schools: A Theoretical Analysis of Adolescents' Masculinity in Government Schools of Haryana

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper examines how government schools in Haryana participate in the gendering of adolescents by shaping specific forms of masculinity among boys. Drawing on a review of gender and education studies and a small body of empirical work from four government schools in Nuh and Gurugram, the paper identifies a persistent gap: existing research tends to focus on girls' disadvantage or treat "boys" and "girls" as homogeneous, binary categories, overlooking the differentiated gender scripts through which masculinities are produced in everyday school life. Using concepts of gender performativity, hegemonic and multiple masculinities, and intersectionality, the analysis foregrounds schools as gendered institutions in which norms around authority, discipline, peer culture and aspiration are actively negotiated and policed. Methodologically, the paper is conceptual, synthesising international and Indian scholarship on schooling and masculinity and using illustrative cases from Haryana to theorise how local social hierarchies and policy discourses intersect within school spaces. The paper argues that attention to adolescent boys' gender socialisation is crucial for advancing gender equality agendas and that school-based interventions must explicitly engage masculinities, not only girls' empowerment. It concludes with implications for gender-transformative pedagogy, teacher education and future empirical research in North Indian government schools.



1. Introduction

Gender has long been recognized as a structuring principle of schooling, shaping not only access and attainment but also the everyday production of norms around femininity and masculinity within classrooms, corridors and playgrounds (Gonick & Conrads, 2022a). While a substantial body of work has documented how schools reproduce gender inequalities and constrain girls' aspirations, far less attention has been paid to how institutions actively script, police and valorise particular forms of boyhood, leaving the gendering of adolescent masculinity comparatively under-theorised in education research (Pascoe, 2005). In the Indian context, and in Haryana specifically, recent experimental and observational studies show that adolescents' gender attitudes are both profoundly unequal and malleable, and that school-based programmes can shift norms towards greater equality, yet these interventions typically take "boys" as a residual category rather than interrogating the multiplicity and hierarchy of masculinities among them. This paper addresses that gap by asking: how do government schools in Haryana contribute to the construction of adolescent masculinities, and what forms of masculine subjectivity are normalised or marginalised in these spaces?

The article is a theoretical analysis that draws on and puts into dialogue scholarship on gender socialisation and schooling with major strands of masculinity theory, particularly Connell's account of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, Butler's notion of gender performativity, and intersectional feminist work on the co-constitution of gender, class and caste. Organised in four main parts following established guidance on theoretical papers, it opens by situating debates on gender and schooling and the specific context of Haryana, then elaborates the theoretical framework, before developing an interpretive analysis of adolescents' masculinity in government schools and, finally, discussing the implications of this argument for educational policy, gender-transformative pedagogy and future empirical research.

2. Context:

Adolescence is widely recognised as a pivotal life stage for the consolidation of identity and for the internalisation or contestation of gender norms, with attitudes formed in these years shaping later choices in education, work, marriage and care (Kågesten et al., 2016). Research from India shows that unequal gender attitudes are visible even among younger adolescents, that boys tend to espouse less equitable views than girls, and that some norms—particularly those around violence and women's autonomy—remain stubbornly resistant to change despite generational shifts. Schooling is central to this process: as mass enrolment expands, schools become key sites where gender roles are modelled, rewarded and



sanctioned, and where structured interventions can either reproduce or challenge dominant scripts of femininity and masculinity(Gonick & Conrads, 2022b)

Haryana provides a particularly revealing context for examining these dynamics, given its historically skewed sex ratios and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, alongside recent efforts to address gender inequality through school-based programming. Government data and policy analyses highlight a system marked by high co-educational enrolment, declining student numbers in many government schools, teacher shortages and an expanding reform agenda that includes mentoring schemes and learning-quality initiatives. Within this environment, the “hidden curriculum” of government schools—embodied in gendered expectations around discipline, subject choice, sports, leadership roles and teacher–student interactions—plays a powerful role in signalling what it means to be a “proper” boy or girl, even when official curricula espouse equality.

A growing body of empirical work on adolescents’ gender attitudes in Haryana(Jayachandran et al., 2018; SINGH, 2013) underscores both the depth of regressive norms and the possibility of change. Survey-based studies using adapted social-psychological tools document strongly discriminatory attitudes among school-going youth but also reveal that these attitudes are malleable, especially when interventions engage both boys and girls in reflective dialogue. Large-scale experimental evaluations of programmes such as Breakthrough’s school-based gender curriculum and related initiatives show that structured, multi-year discussions of gender equality within government schools can produce sustained improvements in attitudes and some behavioural indicators, with particularly notable shifts among boys(Kumar et al., 2017). These findings justify a focused theoretical inquiry into how Haryana’s government schools participate in the construction of adolescent masculinities, and how institutional routines, peer cultures and policy reforms intersect to normalise, contest or reconfigure what counts as acceptable masculinity in this setting.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper conceptualises schools as gendered institutions and primary sites of gender socialisation, drawing on feminist institutional theory and scholarship on gendered organisations. Acker’s work on gendered organisations highlights how ostensibly neutral structures are saturated with gendered assumptions in their rules, hierarchies and everyday practices, producing differentiated opportunities and identities for women and men(J. Acker, 1990). Extending this insight to schooling, schools are treated here not simply as backdrops where pre-formed gender roles are enacted, but as social institutions that



actively construct, legitimise and contest particular forms of femininity and masculinity through curriculum, discipline, assessment, peer cultures and teacher–student relationships(S. Acker, 2015)

Within this broader frame, the analysis is anchored in masculinity theory, especially Connell’s account of hegemonic and multiple masculinities and subsequent refinements that link hegemonic masculinity to institutional contexts. Hegemonic masculinity is understood as the culturally dominant ideal of manhood that secures men’s collective power over women and legitimises the subordination of alternative masculinities, such as those associated with lower class, subordinated caste, non-heteronormative or academically oriented boys(Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). At the same time, the paper foregrounds the plurality of masculinities and the relational dynamics among them, including complicity, marginalisation and resistance, as they are negotiated in school spaces through sport, academic achievement, language use and everyday interactions(Connell, 2020)

These constructs are brought together to analyse how Haryana’s government schools operate as institutional settings where specific masculinities are produced, rewarded or sanctioned. Treating schools as gendered institutions directs attention to timetables, subject tracking, sports, leadership positions and disciplinary regimes that, for example, valorise physically assertive boys in the playground while quietly marginalising studious boys from disadvantaged backgrounds. Reading these institutional patterns through hegemonic masculinity allows the paper to theorise how a dominant model of “proper” boyhood—heterosexual, strong, emotionally contained, capable of controlling girls, aligned with local caste and class hierarchies—becomes normalised, while those who do not conform risk ridicule, exclusion or violence(Christensen & Jensen, 2014).

The choice of this theoretical architecture is justified on both substantive and contextual grounds. Empirical studies of school-based gender programmes in India show that interventions often improve “gender attitudes” without fully interrogating how boys position themselves in relation to dominant and alternative masculinities within the institutional life of schools. A framework that combines gendered-institutional analysis with a nuanced account of masculinities makes it possible to interpret, for instance, why boys in a Haryana government school might support girls’ education in classroom discussions yet still police sisters’ mobility after school, or why participation in life-skills sessions shifts some attitudes but leaves peer-enforced masculine hierarchies largely intact. In focusing on adolescents in government schools in Nuh and Gurugram, the paper therefore uses these theories not only to describe patterns of gender socialisation, but to explain how institutional arrangements and local social orders interact to stabilise or unsettle the gendering of boys in this specific North Indian context.



4. Literature Review

Global and Indian scholarship has established schooling as a central arena in which masculinities are constructed, negotiated and policed, rather than merely reflected (Imms, 2000). Studies of boys' schooling in diverse contexts show how classroom practices, peer cultures, sports and disciplinary regimes work together to privilege "tough," competitive and heteronormative forms of boyhood, while devaluing emotional expressiveness or academic diligence as "unmasculine." (Ghail, 1996) In the Indian context, reviews of masculinity research and education argue that school curricula, everyday interactions and institutional hierarchies continue to naturalise male dominance and encode gender-differentiated expectations in subtle ways, even when overtly framed in the language of equality and rights (Kulkarni, 2014). This body of work underlines that boys are actively learning how to "do" masculinity in school and that educational spaces are key to understanding broader gender orders

A second strand of literature emphasises the intersection of masculinity with class, caste and spatial location in North India (Kaur, 2024). Ethnographic and historical work on rural North Indian masculinities documents how ideals of manhood are bound up with caste-based authority, landownership and control over women's labour and sexuality, producing hierarchies not only between men and women, but among men themselves (Chowdhry, 2014). Research on young men's educational trajectories in north Indian settings shows that "respectable" educated masculinities often remain precarious for marginalised groups, with underemployment and discrimination pushing some towards hyper-masculine assertion, while others cling to respectability by investing in civilised, disciplined male identities. Recent critical analyses further highlight how caste and class shape which boys can claim dominant masculine status in schools, and how lower-caste or poorer boys may be simultaneously stigmatised as violent and denied access to the very resources that confer hegemonic respectability.

A third body of literature focuses more specifically on government schools in Haryana and nearby states as sites for both measuring and reshaping adolescent gender attitudes. Large-scale survey and experimental studies conducted in Haryana document the prevalence of restrictive gender norms among school-going adolescents and demonstrate that a structured, discussion-based school curriculum can produce significant and durable improvements in gender attitudes and some related behaviours. Complementary policy and impact pieces describe how partnerships between the Government of Haryana, civil society organisations and research institutions have positioned government schools as key platforms for gender sensitisation and have also generated rich data on adolescents' beliefs. However, these studies are largely oriented towards measuring attitudinal change and programme impact and pay



less explicit attention to the everyday institutional life of government schools—timetabling, peer group dynamics, leadership structures and informal norms—as arenas where specific masculinities are produced and contested.povertyactionlab+7

Across these strands, two main gaps emerge. First, while there is substantial empirical work on gender attitudes and some attention to boys and young men, there is relatively limited explicit theorisation of adolescent masculinities within government school settings in Haryana, particularly work that brings together institutional analyses of schooling with nuanced masculinity frameworks. Second, existing school-based interventions and evaluations tend to treat “boys” as a homogeneous category whose attitudes should be made more “gender equitable,” rather than interrogating how classed, caste and spatially situated masculinities shape which boys can or cannot take up these equitable positions in practice. The theoretical synthesis proposed in this paper responds to these gaps by combining the notion of schools as gendered institutions with a multi-layered account of masculinity, thereby providing a lens to interpret how government schools in Haryana organise, reward and challenge different forms of boyhood, and how these processes intersect with local hierarchies of class, caste and rural/urban location

Analytical discussion: gendering schools and adolescents’ masculinity

In Haryana’s government schools, formal structures such as timetables, uniforms, subject allocations, sports periods and disciplinary rules organise students’ bodies and movements in ways that are far from gender neutral. Studies of gender socialisation in Indian educational institutions show that, even when teachers verbally endorse equality, routine practices reproduce expectations that boys be physically robust, assertive and less constrained by rules, while girls are expected to be compliant, neat and self-controlled. For example, gender-differentiated uniforms (trousers and looser shirts for boys, salwar-kameez or skirts for girls), segregated seating or assembly lines, and the privileging of boys in access to playground space and competitive sports together signal that mobility, risk-taking and public visibility are more appropriate for boys than for girls, reinforcing a model of masculinity tied to physical presence and dominance. In the field sites in Nuh and Gurugram, this pattern is reflected when games periods are informally treated as a boys’ domain—with football or cricket organised around male teams—while girls are redirected to more sedentary activities or asked to “help” teachers, thereby embedding a gendered division between active, public boys and responsible, domesticated girls within the everyday routine.ijnrd+5

Disciplinary practices and teacher expectations further position boys into particular masculine roles. Research on gender and school discipline in India notes that boys are more likely to be subjected to



public scolding, sarcasm or physical punishment, often framed as necessary to “toughen” them or keep them from becoming “weak,” while girls’ infractions are more likely to be interpreted in moral terms. In the observed Haryana schools, teachers frequently described boys as naturally mischievous and inclined towards fighting, but also as future breadwinners whose academic performance and self-control are crucial for family honour, generating a double expectation that they perform toughness yet remain within acceptable bounds. This aligns with the theoretical framing of schools as gendered institutions: rules around time, dress and conduct encode an ideal of adolescent masculinity that is physically active, somewhat unruly, competitive and oriented towards future provision, and boys learn to inhabit or resist this ideal as they move through the school day. At the same time, initiatives such as gender-sensitisation assemblies or life-skills sessions introduced under state and NGO programmes occasionally interrupt these routines by inviting boys to reflect on care work, non-violence or equitable relationships, creating limited but important cracks in the institutional script.ncert+8

Peer cultures and everyday practices

Beyond formal structures, peer cultures and everyday practices among students are central to the production of “acceptable” or “ideal” masculinities. Studies of bullying and humour in Indian schools and colleges suggest that boys’ peer groups often police masculine norms through teasing, nicknaming, homophobic slurs and ridicule directed at those who are academically oriented, physically slight, emotionally expressive or perceived as too close to girls. In the Haryana field sites, boys who invest heavily in studies, avoid physical confrontations or participate in school cultural activities are at risk of being labelled as “soft” or “girlish,” while those who display bravado in sports, use aggressive humour or assert control over shared spaces gain status within the peer hierarchy. This is consistent with the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is maintained not only by direct violence but by the everyday disciplining of subordinate or complicit masculinities through language and humour.graphyonline+5

These peer practices are tightly woven into the hidden curriculum of the school. Research on gender socialisation in South Asian educational settings underscores how group-based joking, gossip and exclusion serve as informal lessons in what it means to be a “real boy” or “real man,” with aggressive humour and certain forms of bullying reinforcing hierarchies within and between genders. In the Haryana schools, for example, boys’ use of double-meaning jokes and mazaak during breaks and on the way to and from school often centres on women’s bodies, romantic relationships or physical strength, and boys who refuse to participate may be marginalised within the group. At the same time, there are glimpses of alternative peer cultures: some boys form study-oriented groups or cross-gender friendships that value



mutual support and academic success, particularly in higher grades where board examinations loom large. Such practices align more closely with “respectable” or caring masculinities but remain fragile, as they can be undercut by wider peer norms that equate masculinity with dominance and emotional restraint. The theoretical framework helps interpret these dynamics as negotiations among multiple masculinities, in which hegemonic forms are continually reproduced through everyday interactions, yet are also subtly questioned by boys who attempt to combine academic aspiration, emotional openness and egalitarian attitudes within their peer networks.sociology

Intersectional dimensions

The gendering of boys in Haryana’s government schools cannot be understood without attention to intersectional dimensions of caste, class, rural–urban location, religion and language. Studies on intersecting norms in South Asia and on caste–gender–class intersections in education show that formal schooling can simultaneously offer lower-caste and poorer boys a route to “respectable” educated masculinity and expose them to new forms of exclusion or humiliation. In rural and peri-urban Haryana, boys from dominant-caste, relatively better-off households are often positioned—by teachers and peers alike—as natural leaders in the classroom, sports field and student councils, embodying a local ideal of assertive, authoritative masculinity. By contrast, boys from marginalised castes or migrant families may be stereotyped as less disciplined or more prone to violence, and can face subtle discrimination in seating arrangements, expectations of performance or the allocation of responsibilities, even when they outperform peers academically. These dynamics were visible in the field schools where, for instance, Dalit or Muslim boys reported being more frequently blamed for group misbehaviour or addressed with less respectful forms of address, signalling a devalued masculinity linked to their social background.

Rural–urban and religious differences further complicate this picture. Research on regional differences in gender, caste and class highlights that patriarchal norms in North India, including Haryana, are often more stringent in rural areas, with honour tied closely to women’s mobility and men’s capacity to control it. In the studied schools, rural boys sometimes framed their masculinity in terms of protecting sisters and female classmates from perceived threats in the town or city, a stance that coexists uneasily with school messages about gender equality and girls’ rights. Language also matters: fluency in English or standard Hindi can confer a modern, aspirational masculine identity associated with urban success, whereas speaking local dialects or Urdu may be marked as backward or suspect in certain contexts. The theoretical framework of multiple and intersecting masculinities helps explain why boys in the same classroom experience school-based gender socialisation so differently: for some, government schooling



affirms a hegemonic local masculinity that combines educational achievement with caste/class privilege; for others, it offers only partial recognition, requiring them to work harder, moderate their behaviour and navigate stigma to claim respect as “educated men.” In showing how institutional rules, peer cultures and wider social hierarchies intersect in Haryana’s government schools, the analysis demonstrates that the gendering of boys is not a uniform process but a layered, contested one that simultaneously reinforces dominant masculinities and opens limited spaces for more egalitarian and reflexive forms of adolescent manhood.

Implications for policy and practice

Addressing the gendering of schools and adolescent masculinities in Haryana has implications at multiple levels of the education system. Evidence from gender-transformative and school-based programmes in India and globally shows that carefully designed interventions can shift boys’ and girls’ attitudes and reduce gender-based violence, but that such shifts are more sustainable when institutional arrangements, teacher practices and curricula are aligned with the same vision of equality.

School policies

At the level of school policy, codes of conduct, curricular content and co-curricular activities need to move beyond generic commitments to “gender sensitisation” and explicitly address masculinities. National and state guidance already emphasises removing gender bias from textbooks, reviewing curricula and designing gender-sensitive classroom practices, but these efforts often centre girls’ safety and empowerment without scrutinising the norms that govern boys’ behaviour. In Haryana’s government schools, this suggests revising codes of conduct to tackle bullying, sexual harassment and peer policing of masculinity; ensuring that uniforms, sports and leadership opportunities are not implicitly reserved for boys; and integrating discussions of care, emotional expression and shared household responsibilities into social science and life-skills curricula for all students. Co-curricular activities—debates, drama, sports days and school assemblies—can be used deliberately to showcase alternative, caring and cooperative models of boyhood, disrupting the association between masculinity, physical dominance and control over girls’ mobility.

Teacher education and gender-sensitisation

Teacher education and in-service training programmes are critical for translating policy into everyday practice. National teacher-training initiatives and NCERT modules already call for gender sensitisation, but evaluations indicate that many teachers still hold stereotypical expectations of boys as naturally



disruptive or disinterested in care-oriented activities, which can unintentionally reinforce hegemonic masculinities. Pre-service and in-service teacher education in Haryana should therefore include structured reflection on teachers' own assumptions about boys and girls, along with concrete strategies for fostering non-violent, cooperative and emotionally literate masculinities in the classroom—such as equitable participation norms, non-humiliating discipline, and encouragement of boys' engagement in arts, care projects and collaborative work. Training should also familiarise teachers with the content and goals of state-supported gender curricula (such as Taaron Ki Toli) so that they can reinforce these messages across subjects, rather than viewing them as add-ons confined to a single period.

Gender-transformative school interventions in Haryana

The design of gender-transformative interventions in Haryana can build on the demonstrated successes of programmes like Breakthrough's school-based curriculum, which has shown sustained improvements in adolescents' gender attitudes in government schools. Scaling up such programmes—as the state has started to do by integrating gender curriculum into middle schools—offers an opportunity to explicitly engage boys with questions of power, privilege and alternative masculinities, rather than only asking them to “support girls.” Interventions should combine participatory classroom discussions, life-skills education and sports or club activities that model teamwork, respect and non-violence, echoing evidence from India and other low- and middle-income countries that gender-transformative life-skills and sports-based programmes for boys can reduce violent behaviour and foster more equitable relationships. Embedding these interventions within a whole-school approach—linking classroom work with engagement of parents, communities and local governance institutions—can further ensure that boys encounter consistent messages about equality and respectful masculinities across different domains of their lives.

Explicitly addressing masculinities in this way complements, rather than competes with, ongoing efforts to empower girls. Existing programmes in Haryana have rightly focused on girls' retention, safety and aspirations, but evaluations show that progress is often constrained by boys' and men's attitudes and by peer-enforced norms around honour and control. By treating boys not only as potential perpetrators or allies, but as gendered subjects whose identities are being formed in and through school, policy and practice can better target the institutional and relational dynamics that sustain inequality. This dual focus—strengthening girls' agency while transforming school-based masculinities—aligns with emerging global frameworks on gender-transformative education and offers a promising route for



Haryana's government schools to become spaces where more egalitarian, non-violent forms of adolescent manhood can take root

Conclusion

This paper has argued that government schools in Haryana are not neutral spaces where pre-existing gender norms are merely reflected, but active sites of gendering in which institutional routines, peer cultures and broader social hierarchies converge to shape adolescent masculinities. Building on evidence that schools are central to gender socialisation, the analysis shows how timetables, uniforms, sports, disciplinary practices and teacher expectations work alongside peer humour, bullying and friendship patterns to normalise particular forms of boyhood—physically assertive, emotionally restrained, heteronormative and aligned with local caste and class privileges—while marginalising alternative ways of being a boy. Situated in Haryana's patrifocal context, where restrictive gender attitudes among adolescents and adults have been well documented, these school-based processes contribute to the reproduction of unequal gender orders even as recent interventions demonstrate that attitudes are malleable and that boys, in particular, can shift rapidly towards more gender-equitable behaviours when engaged through structured curricula.pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih+6

Theoretically, the paper contributes by bringing together the concept of schools as gendered institutions with a multi-layered account of masculinities to interpret government schooling in a specific North Indian setting. Rather than treating “boys” as a homogeneous category or focusing solely on girls' disadvantage, the framework links institutional arrangements (such as subject tracking, leadership structures and disciplinary regimes), regional gender regimes and the interplay of hegemonic, complicit and marginalised masculinities to explain how certain boys come to embody an idealised “educated” masculinity while others are marked as deviant or deficient. This synthesis extends existing work on adolescent gender attitudes in Haryana by theorising the mechanisms through which school processes mediate the impact of gender-transformative interventions, helping to explain, for instance, why programme evaluations often find larger and more sustained behavioural changes among boys, who may face fewer external constraints on enacting newly acquired egalitarian norms.tandfonline+6

At the same time, the analysis has clear limitations. It draws primarily on secondary literature and a limited set of empirical observations from government schools in Nuh and Gurugram, and thus cannot capture the full diversity of school types, community contexts or students' lived experiences across Haryana. Future research could deepen and test the arguments developed here through comparative ethnographic studies of boys' everyday lives across different districts, school levels and institutional



arrangements, attending closely to variations by caste, class, religion and rural–urban location; longitudinal work that follows cohorts of boys and girls through school and into early adulthood to trace how school-based gender socialisation shapes later trajectories; and mixed-method evaluations that explicitly integrate measures of masculinity and school climate into assessments of gender-transformative programmes. Further theorisation might also explore how digital media, migration and changing labour markets in Haryana are reconfiguring the meanings and possibilities of adolescent manhood, and how government schools respond to, resist or harness these shifts in their everyday gendering practices.

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