Kayleigh Gibson                                                                 May 9th, 2025

# Can the conversation about Netflix's Adolescence produce meaningful change?

*Netflix's series Adolescence has been hailed as a landmark television show for exploring the impact of misogynistic online content being viewed by schoolboys. But it will take more than public conversation to meaningfully tackle misogyny, writes Kayleigh Gibson.*

Reactions to Netflix's series have largely encouraged viewers to engage in conversations with adolescent boys about masculinity and the manosphere. The TV show was inspired by real life cases of schoolboys stabbing schoolgirls and is a critique of a larger epidemic of violence against women and girls. The fictional victim and perpetrator in Adolescence were both subjected to cyber-bullying but ideas about how to be masculine and regain lost status contributed to the young perpetrator's violent response. The series has been praised for encouraging critical thinking about how we have replaced human interactions with technology. Social media posts and click-bait content lack depth and authenticity, so users are vulnerable to harm without opportunities to humanise social interactions. Parents can be unaware of the views their children adopt as a result of cyberbullying or engaging with content that gives them a sense of belonging and superiority over another demographic.

# Societal issues

Adolescence starkly reveals a number of issues. One is how easily teenagers can access pornography. Pornography is accessible without enforced age verification and can frame non-consent as entertainment or teach schoolboys to treat girls as inferior. Increasingly younger audiences are simultaneously being exposed to male-supremacist content and violent pornography. Both dehumanise women and girls.

Government mandated education around healthy sexual relationships is proving insufficient to counteract the widespread misogyny on social platforms. The scale of the problem is staggering. When a new user creates a profile and identifies as male sexist content is shown to them within 26 minutes. If users engage, their feeds can become up to 76 per cent misogynist content. In the face of this torrent of content, Teachers feel ill-equipped to respond to sexist, violent attitudes from schoolboys, with a third of teachers reporting misogynistic incidents every week.

The series illustrates that boys who are lacking a sense of purpose, status or acceptance, are being radicalised by online algorithms that offer a false sense of belonging. Validating male anger increases engagement on social platforms. Repeated exposure to misogynistic perspectives normalises gendered violence and boys' feelings of entitlement towards girls. Attempts to counter this influence, such as conversations around toxic masculinity, have not sufficiently endorsed positive examples of masculinity, authentic male role models or male allyship in reducing gender-based violence.

# Is Adolescence likely to spark a cultural shift?

Conversation about schoolboys' exposure to misogyny only raises awareness of part of the problem. While boys' mental health can suffer because of exposure to hateful content, girls are most impacted and feel significantly less safe in school than schoolboys. Conversations about male behaviour should include listening to boys but will not necessarily improve girls' safety. Changing ideas does not guarantee changing behaviours. Conversations around male violence against women, such as #MeToo and the vigil for Sarah Everard have increased outrage without reductions in gendered harm. While funds have been raised to support victim-survivors of sexual assault and reports have been made into UK policing, girls feel less safe in schools since 2019. Assigning blame to the police, social media, smart phones, schoolboys or girls, fails to address deep-rooted misogyny in our patriarchal society. This has enabled stalling progress towards gender equity and reduced online content moderation. Reduced moderation enables harassment in the guise of free speech, while women and girls disproportionately avoid sharing their views or experiences online.

# Why Adolescence should not be shown in schools

The government announced that Adolescence should be shown in schools but the TV show was not designed as a training programme. It starts a conversation but does not empower teachers to

respond to misogyny and does not fill the gap in education on healthy sexual relationships.

Watching Adolescence does not protect girls from feeling afraid in school and could further disengage boys, who feel blamed, without providing a route back from the manosphere. Viewing the TV show without critical thinking risks further normalising violence against women. If schoolboys were guaranteed to view content critically, they would not be manipulated by the manosphere. There is no silver bullet to address the harmful, societal gender biases that sustain gender roles and the manosphere, allowing new forms of misogyny to develop online.

People's attitudes are not the only cause of their behaviour; sometimes individuals prioritise social harmony over their belief that a sexist joke is wrong. Gender roles are performed based on accepted behaviours for individuals with a female or male body, suggesting social harmony is often reliant on accepted gender narratives being upheld. This may be why highly prevalent misogynistic content has increased sexist behaviour. Environmental factors are impactful in changing behaviour, so online content moderation is essential to remove opportunities to normalise misogyny.

Banning smart phones in schools would not stop children accessing harmful content elsewhere. However, holding tech-platforms accountable could improve age verification and significantly reduce the prevalence of violence-inciting content. Funding platforms for consensual, respectful sexual content would promote more humanised online experiences. Improved cyberbullying safeguards would encourage young people to share their experiences without fearing abuse. Social platforms should, by design, proactively reduce opportunities for harassment and legislation must make it less profitable to promote harmful content and gender roles.

There is no digital solution to a social problem, so offline conversations should not be a single occurrence. Parents and teachers should keep actively listening to young people's perspectives. Extending education on critical thinking, respectful relationships and growth mindsets may help to mitigate belief in a fixed gender hierarchy. A growth mindset allows people to learn, reduces the importance of superior status and builds resistance to negative stereotypes because our abilities are not considered innate. A mindset shift, combined with promoting positive male role models, may enable boys to return from the manosphere.

*Photo credit: Netflix*

## About the author

**Kayleigh Gibson**

Kayleigh Gibson is a PhD Candidate in Security and Intelligence Studies at the University of Buckingham. Kayleigh will work with LSE's Women Peace Security Centre for her post-

doctorate and is writing grant proposals for projects investigating the backlash against women's rights and extreme online misogyny.

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