



## How can toxic masculinity be addressed in school environment

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### Behavior | Amid the rise of radicalized misogynistic content on the internet, schools are looking for ways to address the situation among students

\*By Ana Gonzalez

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A few clicks on TikTok or YouTube are enough to report the seriousness of the problem. At the top of the search results terms such as red pill, alpha and sigma, videos by digital influencers from the masculinist niche show off thousands of likes and share a topic that reveals a worrying pattern: online communities of men who rely on radicalized misogyny to disseminate ideals of male behavior anchored in virility, violence, and hatred of the feminine. Topics that used to hide in the Internet, limited to forums of restricted access and private chats, today they have millions of views on the main social networks and have a legion of followers. As schools are at the center of this ideological hurricane as a result of unrestricted access to the internet by children and teenagers and widespread dissemination of this type of content, preventing schools from becoming an environment for the dissemination of these ideals among boys in age of development has become a concern.

According to researcher Michele Prado, author of the book *Redpill – radicalização e extremismo* (Redpill-radicalization and extremism, free translation), preventing these ideals from reaching school aged boys with unmonitored access to the Internet is an almost impossible task. “Until recently, extremist content used to be restricted to certain blogs and websites, but today it is fully disseminated in the public debate,” she explains. In addition, the pressing urge to blend in and to belong to a group that permeates childhood and adolescence makes school boys more susceptible to being attracted and co-opted by radicalized masculinist ideology. “Children and adolescents often don’t have enough disposition to resist certain extremist contents,” warns the researcher.

The consequences of the exponential increase in extremist content production and its consumption by children and adolescents translate into alarming data. According to a report by the Instituto Sou da Paz, from 2002 to 2018, Brazil recorded seven violent attacks on schools. There were 17 attacks between 2019 and May 2023. Many of the attackers used to spread radicalized contents and idolized other perpetrators of the same type of action on social networks before the crimes were committed. For the professor of the Faculty of Education of UFRGS and coordinator of the Research group in Education and Gender Relations, Fernando Seffner, the link between the factors is clear — and scary.

“There are very strong social mechanisms involved in this and, if remedial measures are not taken, they will evolve and eventually cross lines into increasing acts of violence”  
— Fernando Seffner

#### Reflections of Radicalization

On the other side of the dilemma of misogyny, female students and other minorities (racial, religious or relating to sexual and gender orientation) have become the main victims. “The school is produced by the culture that molds us as gendered subjects,” explains André Luiz dos Santos Silva, professor at the of Physical Education School at UFRGS and coordinator of the Research Group on Gender Relations, Education and Violence. According to him, the school territory mirrors our society, it is not a bubble, protected from external factors. This means that any prejudice and discrimination present in society will manifest in the school environment.

Intrinsic practices to school culture, reinforced by authority figures such as teachers, coordinators, and principals, can also help perpetuate misogynistic ideas among students. Habits such as separating boys from girls in physical education classes, for example, assume that girls are fragile and boys are superior with regard to physical activities, and make it difficult for female students to develop their sports skills in the same pace as boys, restraining their potential and depriving them of opportunities.

According to André, the elimination of misogynistic culture in the school environment is crossed by many important factors, but the most important one is to elicit specific demands of each school by the pedagogical team. Accomplishment of goals will only be reached if (and when) racial, religious and gender diversities present in the school environment are taken into account and the students’ families are included in the process.

“We need to see what is worth and what is not worth for each of these spaces, and the contact with the school community is essential to choose the right strategies”  
— André Luiz dos Santos Silva

#### Building new possibilities

There were many students of the sociology teacher of the Laboratory School, Katiuci Pavei, who mobilized so that the debates about gender were introduced to the classrooms where they attend high school in the Youth and Adult Education (EJA) Program, but it was the report of a specific student that inspired the teacher to accept the requests.

He said he had been raised thinking that being a man was a one-perspective construct, but talking about it at school made him realize there are other views to take into consideration, and respecting women’s rights,” she says. The teacher also points out that the demand to talk about the subject more seriously came from students both men and women: men as agents of a system that puts them in a position of privilege, and women, as men’s main victims — all in search of ways to build possibilities that divert from the path of toxic masculinity.

Katiuci believes that the discussion about the concepts of masculinity and gender in school does not end in the classroom but is taken to other levels and powers through the awareness and participation of students.

“It is important mainly to encourage positive masculinities and to put into discussion a project to deconstruct masculinities that are toxic”  
— Katiuci Pavei

#### Countercurrent

Despite the positive acceptance by Katiuci’s students, the debates on gender and women’s rights in the classroom, which have already been included in the curriculum of the EJA team of the Laboratory School and many other schools, struggle against regular attempts of suppression in the school environment. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, between 2014 and 2022, more than 200 legislative proposals that aimed to prohibit education about gender and sexuality in schools in Brazil were submitted.

“There is a social context of increase of conservatism that has tried to prohibit this type of debate,” says André. He points out, however, that there is legal support for the topic to be discussed in the classroom. The Brazilian Educational Laws and Guidelines (LDB) upholds the teaching of content related to human rights and the prevention of all types of violence against women. In addition, a law approved in 2022 created the School Week to Combat Violence against Women and inserted it in the calendar of public and private schools around the country.

Professor Fernando, however, points out that, despite positive advances in the legal sphere, most initiatives to combat radicalized ideologies in schools are based on individual teachers’ efforts, and not on robust and efficient social policies. “Public policies do not give those teachers financial support, and encouragement; public policies do not get involved,” he explains.

It is in this turbulent scenario, which mixes progress efforts with significant investments in the opposite direction, that schools balance between the dangers of misogynistic radicalization and attempts to combat and prevent the violence created by extremism. Teachers, in the meantime, continue as key players in the fight against extremist culture and in the creation of new ways of thinking and acting in a world that poses hostile openings, but also innovative and surprising ones. “They do very important things that need to be expanded and encouraged,” Fernando says.

Translated into English by **Amélia Maia Mendes**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course “Supervised Translation Training II (English)” of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari R. Becker (P.h.D.) – IL/UFRGS.

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[jornal@ufrgs.br](mailto:jornal@ufrgs.br)

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