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THE MASCULINITY TRAP: GENDER IDENTITY, EDUCATIONAL DISENGAGEMENT, AND INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT AMONG MALE YOUTH IN INDIA

Janhvi Singh
Department of Social Science and Humanities
Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University, Jaipur, India

Abstract: In India, the early exit of male youth from schooling into the informal workforce is conventionally explained through the lens of household poverty. This article argues that such explanations, while partially valid, are incomplete. Drawing on R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and using secondary data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2022–23) and the NSSO 75th Round, the article demonstrates that gender identity — specifically the internalized belief that a "real man" must earn — operates as an independent driver of early school dropout among male youth, accelerating workforce entry even in households where immediate economic survival is not the primary constraint. Cross-tabulations show a persistent male–female dropout gap within identical income quintiles, and higher male dropout even where a household earner is already present, patterns that a purely economic account cannot explain. The article concludes that policy responses built solely around financial incentives are insufficient, and that lasting change requires parallel cultural interventions that decouple masculine self-worth from premature earning. The findings contribute to the emerging interdisciplinary literature bridging gender sociology and labour economics in the Indian context.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, male youth, school dropout, informal employment, gender identity, India, labour economics

I. INTRODUCTION

When researchers ask male youth in India why they left school, the most common answer is money: the family needed income, there were bills to pay, siblings to support. This answer is true, but it is not the whole truth. Alongside the economic explanation sits a quieter, more powerful force — the belief that being a man means earning. A boy who remains in school while his family struggles does not merely

feel financially unproductive; he feels that he is failing at being male. This article is concerned with that feeling and its consequences for educational outcomes.

The sociology of gender has long established that masculinity is not simply a biological fact but a social performance, one that must be actively and repeatedly demonstrated, particularly in contexts where it is precarious or under threat. In low-income households in India, where resources are scarce and social status is fragile, young men face intense pressure to demonstrate manhood through economic contribution. Within this setting, school is not merely an opportunity cost measured in foregone wages; it is perceived as an active threat to masculine identity itself.

This distinction matters for policy. If financial pressure were the whole story, scholarships, stipends, and conditional cash transfers should be sufficient to keep boys enrolled. This article argues that as long as the cultural equation of manhood with early earning persists, such instruments will continue to under-perform, because they address the economic surface of the problem while leaving its cultural foundation untouched.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on school dropout in India has historically been dominated by economic and supply-side explanations: household poverty, the direct and opportunity costs of schooling, distance to school, and the quality of educational infrastructure (Kingdon, 2007; Tilak, 2002). Kingdon's (2007) review of Indian schooling documents steady gains in enrolment but persistent gaps in retention, particularly among poorer and rural households, largely attributed to cost and quality constraints on the supply side.

A parallel and substantial literature has examined the gender dimension of Indian education, though this has focused overwhelmingly on the disadvantage faced by girls. Desai and Kulkarni (2008) trace the narrowing, but persistent, gender gap in Indian educational attainment and link it to caste, religion, and regional inequality. Dreze and Sen (2013) similarly foreground female educational disadvantage as a central concern of Indian human development policy, and Kabeer (2005) situates girls' education within a broader empowerment framework tied to the Millennium Development Goals. This body of work has produced considerable policy attention and measurable gains for girls' schooling.

What this literature has largely not done is treat male educational disengagement as a gendered phenomenon in its own right,

rather than as a residual economic category. Where male dropout is discussed, it tends to be folded into general poverty and labour-supply analyses (ILO, 2017; World Bank, 2019), which document the scale of youth informal employment without asking why the burden of early income generation falls so disproportionately, and so early, on sons rather than daughters even within the same household.

The theoretical resources to ask that question exist outside the education literature, principally in the sociology of masculinity. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity has been widely applied to labour markets, violence, and health behaviour, but comparatively rarely to schooling decisions in the South Asian context. This article draws that literature into conversation with Indian labour force data, treating the persistence of a gender gap in dropout within identical income strata as an empirical signature of a cultural, rather than a purely economic, process.

Recent evidence lends further weight to treating male disengagement from schooling as a distinct and worsening phenomenon rather than a residual category. Government enrolment data for 2024–25 show a national decline in school enrolment driven overwhelmingly by a fall of over eleven lakh in the number of boys enrolled, even as girls' enrolment held broadly steady (Ministry of Education, 2025), a pattern consistent with the identity-based account advanced here. A recent Harvard Kennedy School diagnostic study of young Indian men similarly finds that provider expectations remain central to how men aged 18–30 define manhood, that a large majority feel their generation's economic prospects are worse than their fathers', and that this role–opportunity mismatch is closely linked to poorer mental health and more restrictive gender attitudes (Salazar-Diaz & Wu, 2026). While that study examines labour-market and digital-media dynamics among young adults rather than school-age dropout directly, its findings reinforce the claim that the internalization of the provider role, not economic hardship alone, continues to shape male behaviour in contemporary India.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is grounded in R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, developed most fully in Masculinities (Connell, 1995). Connell argues that in any given social context there exists a dominant, culturally idealized form of masculinity that shapes the behaviour and

self-understanding of men and boys. In the Indian context, this hegemonic ideal is closely bound to economic provision: the man who earns, supports his family, and does not depend on others occupies the socially valued masculine position. Boys who fall short of this ideal risk social ridicule, family disappointment, and a diminished sense of self.

Connell's framework is important here because it locates the mechanism not in direct coercion but in internalization. Boys come to want to fulfil the provider role because their sense of self-worth becomes attached to it, not only because they are instructed to do so. This internalization is what allows masculine identity to function as a driver of behaviour independent of, and sometimes in excess of, strict economic calculation.

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus complements this account by explaining the intergenerational reproduction of these dispositions. Boys raised in households and communities where early work is the norm for males acquire a practical, embodied sense that this is simply what men do; it feels natural, inevitable, and even honourable rather than a deprivation. The habitus of working-class masculinity in India thus normalizes early workforce entry as a rite of passage into manhood rather than as a foreclosed opportunity.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This article employs a secondary data analysis approach, drawing on two nationally representative datasets: the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Annual Report 2022–23 and the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) 75th Round on Household Social Consumption in Education (2017–18). These datasets were selected because they provide data disaggregated by age, sex, household income quintile, and rural–urban classification, enabling comparative analysis of dropout and labour force participation across gender and income groups.

The analytical strategy is descriptive and inferential rather than causal-econometric. Cross-tabulations of male and female dropout rates within identical income quintiles are used to isolate a gender-specific effect that cannot be attributed to household economic pressure alone, since that pressure is held constant across sexes within a quintile. The persistence of a gender gap after this comparison is treated as evidence consistent with — though not conclusive proof of — the masculine identity hypothesis advanced here. No causal claims are made beyond what cross-

sectional secondary data can support; this limitation is discussed further below.

V. FINDINGS

Finding 1: A Gender Gap Persists Within Households of Identical Income

Early workforce entry among male youth is markedly higher than among female youth even in households at identical income levels. In the second income quintile, the early employment rate for males aged 15–18 is 47.2 per cent, compared with 28.3 per cent for females in the same households (PLFS, 2023, Table 14A). If economic pressure were the sole driver of early work, similar rates would be expected across sexes, since families facing identical financial conditions should, in principle, draw both sons and daughters into work in comparable proportions. The gap instead points to a gender-specific mechanism.

Finding 2: Boys Drop Out Even When a Household Earner Is Present

In households where the father is present and employed, male youth remain significantly more likely to drop out of school than female youth — a pattern difficult to reconcile with a purely economic account. If the household already has a primary earner, the pressure on children to work should, in theory, ease equally for sons and daughters. The NSSO 75th Round data show a male dropout rate 2.4 times the female rate within this father-present sub-group, holding across all income quintiles (NSSO, 2018, Statement 13), suggesting that masculine identity expectations operate independently of strict economic necessity.

Finding 3: The Income Gradient

Table 1. Male Dropout and Early Workforce Entry by Household Income Quintile

Household Income Quintile	Male Dropout Rate (15–18)	Early Workforce Entry (%)
Lowest 20% (below Rs. 1,500/month)	52.7%	61.3%
Second quintile (Rs. 1,500–2,500)	38.4%	47.2%
Middle quintile (Rs. 2,500–4,000)	24.1%	31.5%

Household Income Quintile	Male Dropout Rate (15–18)	Early Workforce Entry (%)
Fourth quintile (Rs. 4,000–7,000)	13.8%	18.2%
Top 20% (above Rs. 7,000/month)	5.2%	7.1%

Source: PLFS 2022–23, Annual Report Table 21; NSSO 75th Round Statement 7. Dropout rate = percentage not currently enrolled, never completed secondary schooling. Workforce entry = labour force participation rate, usual principal status, age 15–18.

Finding 4: The Rural–Urban Divide

Table 2. Rural–Urban Comparison of Male Educational and Labour Market Outcomes

Indicator	Rural	Urban
Male dropout rate, aged 15–18	38.2%	19.7%
LFPR, male aged 15–24	47.2%	31.6%
Share below secondary in workforce	56.3%	28.9%
Average monthly earnings (Rs.)	7,840	12,650

Source: PLFS 2022–23, Annual Report Tables 3, 6, and 22. LFPR on usual principal and subsidiary status basis. Earnings refer to average wage/salary earnings of regular wage/salaried employees.

In rural communities, hegemonic masculine norms tend to be more rigidly enforced, and visible examples of educated men in secure employment are scarcer. The masculine identity of the rural working male therefore becomes a more immediate and credible reference point for young men than the more abstract, deferred promise of returns to education.

VI. DISCUSSION

The implications of this argument are significant and, in policy terms, uncomfortable. If masculine identity is an independent driver of early dropout rather than a mere reflection of economic

pressure, the problem is more deeply rooted than most existing policy frameworks acknowledge.

A boy who leaves school because his family needs money can, in principle, be kept enrolled if that financial need is met through external support. A boy who leaves school because remaining enrolled makes him feel like less of a man will not necessarily stay even when a stipend is provided, because the underlying driver is not fundamentally economic. Financial support addresses the surface condition while leaving the cultural driver untouched.

This is not an argument against financial interventions, which remain essential, particularly for the poorest households where economic pressure is most acute. It is an argument that such interventions must be accompanied by cultural work that actively challenges the equation of masculinity with early earning. India's experience with female education offers a useful precedent: campaigns that reframed girls' schooling as a source of family pride and community progress produced measurable and lasting attitudinal change. Comparable efforts, targeted specifically at male youth and at the families and communities that shape their masculine self-understanding, are needed.

Schools themselves have a role in this cultural shift. When education is visibly and practically connected to real economic futures, it becomes easier for young men to defend continued enrolment against community pressure to work. The educated, skilled male needs to become a culturally valued masculine identity in his own right, rather than a socially suspect figure seen as delaying adult responsibility.

It is also worth noting that early workforce entry carries long-term costs that are largely invisible to the families making these decisions in the moment. Over 45 per cent of working males aged 15–24 are in casual agricultural or construction labour with no job security and no progression pathway, and only 9.4 per cent access formal-sector employment (PLFS, 2023). The masculinity trap thus delivers not durable provider status but a lifetime of low-earning informal work — a considerable, and largely unrecognized, cost to the very identity it claims to fulfil.

VII. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this article relies entirely on secondary cross-sectional data from PLFS 2022–23 and the NSSO 75th Round. While nationally representative and methodologically robust, cross-

sectional data cannot establish causal direction; the observed gender gap in dropout within income quintiles is consistent with the masculine identity hypothesis advanced here but cannot rule out alternative explanations with certainty.

Second, and most significantly, this article does not incorporate primary qualitative data. The claim that boys experience school dropout as a masculine identity performance, rather than a purely economic calculation, is theoretically grounded and consistent with the quantitative patterns presented, but ideally requires ethnographic or interview-based evidence to substantiate at the level of individual experience. Future research combining PLFS-type quantitative analysis with in-depth qualitative fieldwork in high-dropout communities would strengthen the causal argument considerably.

Third, the NSSO 75th Round education data date from 2017–18, and some figures may not fully reflect post-pandemic changes in educational participation and labour market conditions for male youth. More recent household survey data on educational attainment should be used to update and validate these findings as they become available.

Fourth, this article treats "India" as a relatively unified context. In practice, the strength of hegemonic masculine norms, community enforcement mechanisms, and the visibility of educated male role models vary substantially across states, castes, and religious communities. Disaggregated state- or community-level analysis would produce a more textured picture than the national-level patterns presented here.

VIII. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Three interconnected policy directions follow from this analysis.

First, cultural awareness programmes targeting parents, community leaders, and religious figures in high-dropout areas should explicitly address the link between masculine identity and educational dropout, reframing continued male education as consistent with — and an expression of — responsible masculinity. Such messaging is likely to carry more credibility when delivered through trusted community voices rather than government channels alone.

Second, financial support should be expanded but reframed. Attendance-conditional stipends for male secondary students from below-poverty-line households remain necessary, but should be presented publicly as investments in future earning capacity rather than as

welfare transfers, directly engaging rather than bypassing the recipient's masculine identity.

Third, curriculum reform that integrates vocational and practical learning connected to visible, near-term economic outcomes can reduce the perceived gap between studying and earning that feeds masculine identity pressure. Mentorship programmes featuring educated working men from similar class and community backgrounds can provide young men with concrete, credible alternatives to the early-work masculine identity, demonstrating that education and manhood are compatible rather than opposed.

IX. CONCLUSION

Early school dropout and premature workforce entry among male youth in India cannot be fully understood, or effectively addressed, through the lens of economic pressure alone. Masculine identity — the internalized cultural belief that manhood requires earning — functions as an independent force that accelerates exit from education even when economic necessity does not strictly demand it.

Drawing on Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Bourdieu's concept of habitus, alongside PLFS 2022–23 and NSSO 75th Round data, this article has sought to make that argument visible and to trace its implications for research and policy. The gender gap in dropout within identical-income households, and the persistence of higher male dropout even where a household earner is present, are patterns that economic explanations alone cannot account for.

Addressing male dropout in India requires working simultaneously on two levels: reducing the financial barriers that make early work economically necessary, and challenging the cultural construction of masculinity that makes early work feel morally necessary. Neither intervention is sufficient without the other. A stipend without cultural change leaves the identity pressure intact; cultural messaging without financial support leaves families unable to act on changed attitudes. India's development depends on the full educational participation of its young male population, which in turn requires taking seriously not only the economics of poverty but the sociology of manhood.

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