

# Understanding consent and boundaries

Exploring attitudes of adolescent  
boys towards consent and stalking



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# Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a deeply rooted issue in India, one that calls for a thoughtful and inclusive approach. It is essential to involve various stakeholders and create safe spaces where meaningful conversations can take place around gender, the impact of gender-based violence, power structures, patriarchy, and masculinity. Understanding the social and cultural dynamics of masculinity is essential for effective intervention.

Traditional masculine norms in India often promote dominance and aggression, contributing to divided gender roles, discrimination and gender-based violence (Krishnan, 2023). Socialisation into these norms influences boys' attitudes toward gender roles and violence.

A study by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) examined how patriarchal attitudes shape men's roles and their views on gender equality, highlighting that Indian men often have rigid views about gender roles, such as the belief that household chores are primarily a woman's responsibility, and that men should be the primary breadwinners and decision-makers within the household (ICRW, 2000).

UNICEF recognises that addressing VAWG requires the active involvement of men and boys. Their approach promotes a human rights framework, emphasising the importance of engaging boys in discussions about gender equality. A critical barrier to achieving gender equality is the widespread misunderstanding of consent among boys.



Many still associate consent with everyday scenarios like borrowing things, sharing media, or joining group activities, rather than recognising its importance in intimate relationships. This lack of understanding contributes to the normalisation of coercion and aggression in sexual situations, increasing the risk of violence (Katz, 2006).

The influence of patriarchy is central to these issues. Patriarchal norms define rigid expectations for boys, often leading them to view emotional expression as weakness and dominance as strength. This not only harms women and girls, but also negatively impacts boys' mental health, as they are discouraged from seeking help for emotional or psychological issues.

Research has shown that peer pressure significantly influences boys' behaviours, with many engaging in aggressive actions to fit in, thereby perpetuating toxic masculinity (Singh & Chandel, 2022).

Boys are also taught to assert dominance in relationships, which can result in not prioritising consent. Studies indicate that boys who fail to conform to traditional masculine norms face bullying and social ostracisation, further reinforcing harmful ideas about masculinity (Kimmel, 2009). Moreover, societal expectations often pressure boys to fulfil traditional roles in romantic relationships, such as always paying for dates or initiating contact, which further compounds the issue.

Studies have shown that boys sometimes struggle with understanding the complexities of sexual consent, particularly in situations where dominance and power dynamics are prioritised (Setty, 2022). Given this context, in 2024 the Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF) held five discussions with adolescent boys to explore their understanding of consent, particularly in the context of intimate relationships, and their views on the culture of stalking.

MFF regularly engages boys in conversations on gender and gender-based violence to foster a safe, inclusive and gender-just environment for all. Addressing these topics through the lens of consent and personal boundaries is essential, as it is related with an individual's voice and agency, and the violation of personal boundaries is a significant contributing factor in perpetuating violence.

In many cases, consent is often misunderstood or dismissed, with many failing to link it to an individual's agency and choice. This gap in understanding can fuel rising incidents of violence, especially against women and girls.

This study investigates how societal pressures, patriarchal values, and insufficient education on consent shape adolescent boys' views in India, and highlights how social conditioning and rigid gender norms create confusion around consent and boundaries, contributing to the cycle of gender-based violence.

The findings emphasise the need for open, ongoing dialogues with boys on these complex topics to promote a culture of respect for the dignity and agency of individuals, especially women and girls.

## Purpose of the study

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MFF has been engaging with adolescents under its flagship programme, Kadam Badhate Chalo, and has held many conversations with adolescents and conducted studies on their attitudes towards gender-based discrimination and violence. These studies and conversations have highlighted the need for discussions around consent and personal boundaries to develop a more critical understanding of violence.

Further, with a global rise in gender-based violence and a threat to gender-based development, there's a strong need to continue to hold such spaces and conversations to address consent, boundaries, and how and why certain behaviours have become norms or been normalised.

This study focused on engaging adolescent boys in reflective group discussions about consent, boundaries, and stalking, both in personal relationships and in digital and social contexts. It sought to understand boys' views on these issues, exploring how they define consent, communicate boundaries, and their attitudes toward behaviours like stalking.

This study marks the first step towards fostering deeper, more meaningful conversations around consent and boundaries. As a next step, we will engage in another round of discussions with adolescent girls. The findings from both studies will then be shared with adolescent boys and girls to facilitate constructive dialogues, encouraging joint reflections and collaborative thinking on the way forward.

# Methodology

## Study participants

The study involved 82 adolescent boys between the age group of 12 to 19 years from five locations: Taimoor Nagar (12), Sonia Camp - Dilshad Garden (19), Tigri (18), Mukherjee Nagar (12) in Delhi and Panipat (21) in Haryana participated in focus group discussions. Most of the adolescent boys part of the focus group discussions were sons/brothers of women and girls that MFF has been working with for many years, and thus they were part of the discussion through peer reference.

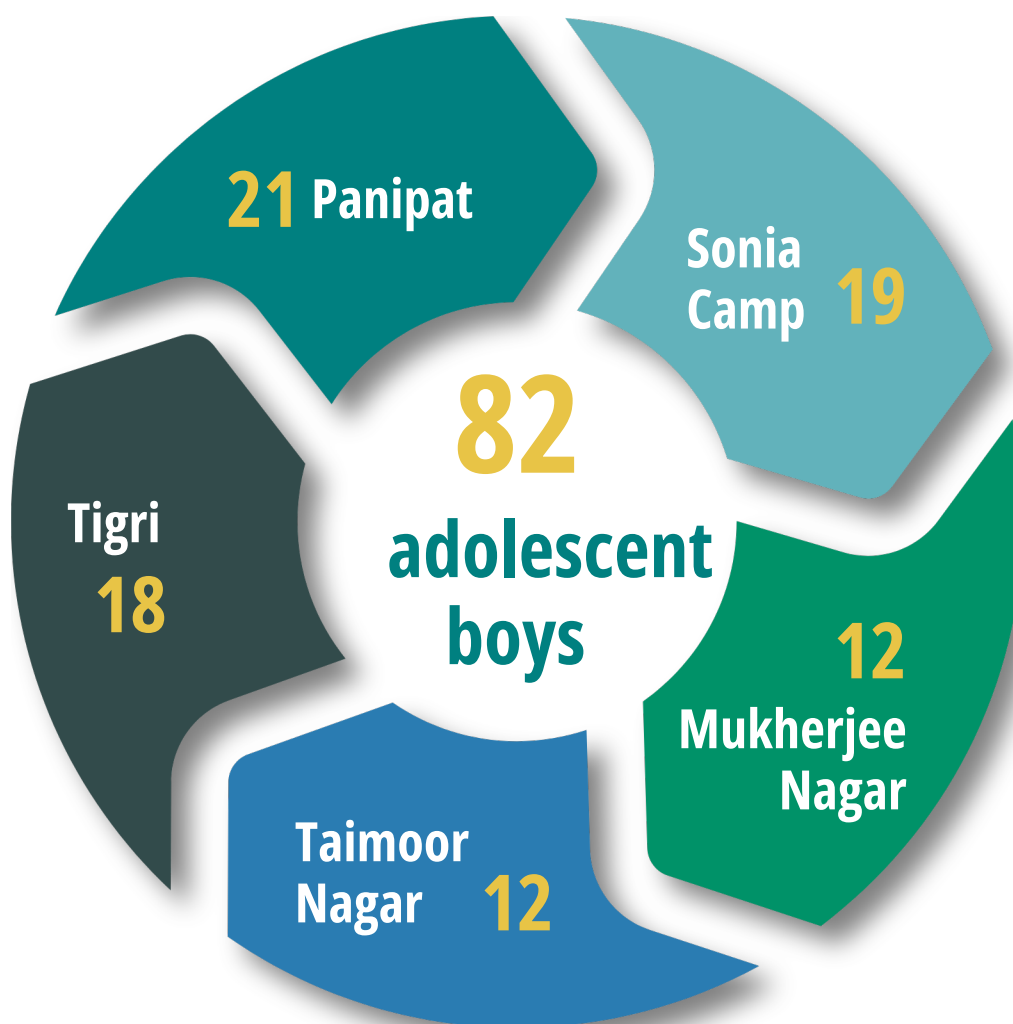


Figure 1: Participant breakdown



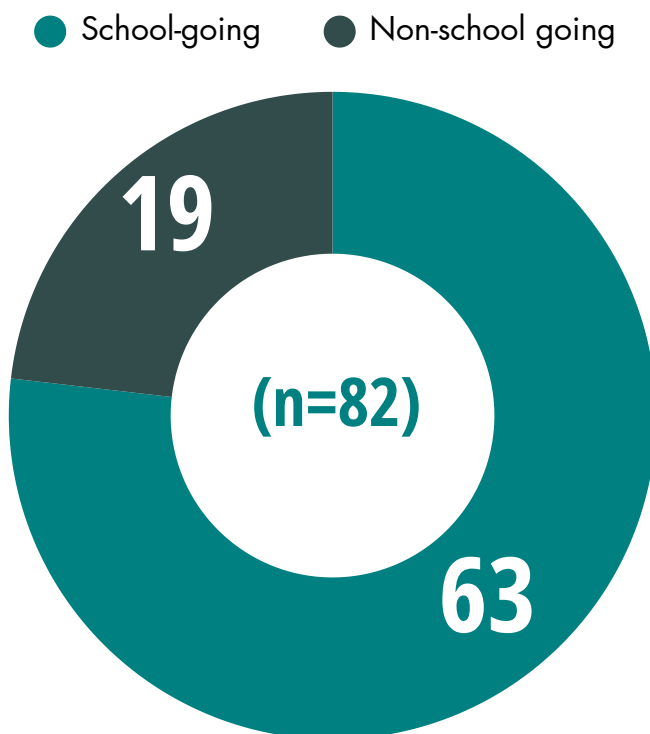


Figure 2: Participant schooling level

Most of the boys were attending formal education institutions, with a breakdown of their school enrollment given below:

- School-going participants: 63 (mostly from the age group 12-16)
- Non-school-going participants: 19 (mostly from the age group 17-19)

The boys in each group were largely familiar with each other because they were from the same communities, or from the same schools or coaching centres. Though familiarity can be a conduit for silence, especially when it comes to speaking about one's vulnerabilities, it can also provide for a relaxed environment, where open and honest discussions can happen.

## Process

There were five discussions in the form of learning and sharing circles held in total, spread across five locations. The discussions were held in informal and familiar places, chosen by the boys themselves, where they would feel comfortable, like community study rooms, community halls, or areas used for doing group activities like playing and organising picnics.

Participants were familiar with the facilitators; hence, along with the familiar space, the trust between the facilitators and participants made them comfortable in sharing their views. While most of the discussion was through facilitated conversations, there was some informal polling conducted as well, to obtain spontaneous responses. The facilitators used open-ended questions to encourage critical thinking. Each session aimed to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and equality, where everyone could share their views without fear of judgement.



## Fostering safe space for expression

To ensure a respectful and safe environment, the following ground rules were established:

- **Safe space:** All participants will be encouraged to express their thoughts openly, without fear of judgement.
- **Mutual respect:** Each participant's views will be respected, and no one will be allowed to mock or belittle others.
- **Equality:** All participants will have an equal chance to contribute to the conversation.
- **Supportive interactions:** Participants will be encouraged to engage in a positive and supportive manner.

## Data collection

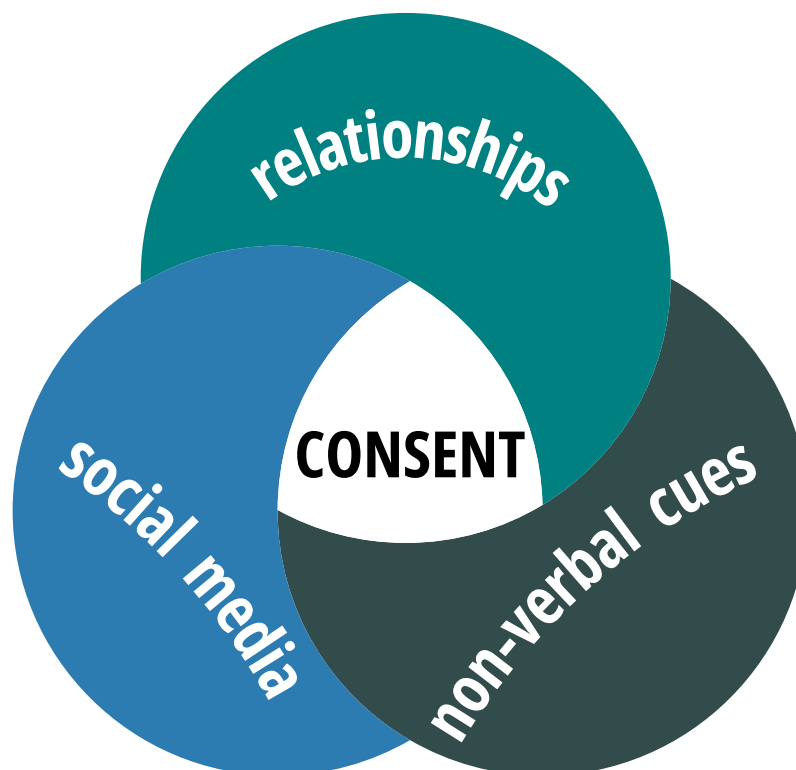
The primary method of data collection was through facilitated group discussions, structured as learning and sharing circles. The aim was to create a safe, non-judgmental space where participants could openly share their perspectives. In these discussions, respect was emphasised, with participants encouraged to listen actively and engage constructively, even when disagreements arose. The facilitator guided the conversation with a series of open-ended questions designed to explore the boys' perceptions of consent, boundaries, and stalking. These questions were crafted to prompt thoughtful reflection and foster critical engagement with these key issues.

**Informed consent:** Prior to the session, the facilitator asked for the boys' consent to record the discussion. The recording was for the purpose of transcription and data analysis. The consent to participate was implied through active engagement in the discussion.

**Translation of responses:** The data was collected in Hindi, and all quotes provided in the findings have been translated into English for analysis while maintaining the authenticity of the responses.

Some of the prompting questions that were used to facilitate the discussions included:

- 1. Understanding consent** What does consent look like in a relationship? How should consent be communicated or expressed?
- 2. Non-verbal cues and consent** Can silence or non-verbal communication (like smiling) be interpreted as consent?
- 3. Ongoing consent** How often should consent be sought in a relationship?
- 4. Stalking and privacy** What is stalking, and is it acceptable to constantly stalk someone on social media or in real life?



The facilitator also used real-life scenarios and follow-up prompts to deepen the discussion. For example, participants were asked to reflect on situations where they might need to ask for consent multiple times throughout a relationship, not just at the beginning.

## Analysis of data

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The responses from the group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. Both deductive and inductive analysis processes were used, with some themes being pre-established (including consent, boundaries, and comfort) and some themes emerging from the discussions (such as non-verbal cues, vulnerability, blame, and permission). The following steps were followed in the analysis:

- 1) **Transcription and translation:** The verbatim responses from the session were transcribed in Hindi, and then translated into English. No content was paraphrased or altered. All quotes were translated directly to preserve the authenticity of the participants' expressions.
- 2) **Coding:** Each participant's response was reviewed and coded based on recurring themes. For example, the concept of consent was associated with themes like "permission," "trust," "boundaries," and "comfort." Similarly, responses about stalking were coded around ideas like "following," "intentions," "vulnerability," and "blame."
- 3) **Theme identification:** After coding the responses, key themes were identified that encapsulated the main points made by the boys. These themes were then used to structure the findings and to provide a more nuanced understanding of how the boys viewed issues related to consent and stalking.
- 4) **Reflexivity:** Throughout the analysis, the facilitator's observations were also considered, especially regarding the hesitation and initial discomfort among the participants in discussing these sensitive topics.

Key themes that emerged include:



### Misconceptions about consent

Many participants understood consent in very basic terms, often associating it with situations like asking permission to borrow something, without fully grasping its broader significance in relationships, especially intimate relationships.



### Non-verbal cues

Several participants believed that silence or non-verbal cues, such as a smile, could be interpreted as consent, which revealed a misunderstanding of the need for clear verbal communication.



### Gender norms and biases

Some responses reflected traditional gender views, with boys expressing expectations about women's behaviour and autonomy in relationships.



### Normalisation of stalking

A number of boys seemed to normalise behaviours associated with stalking, particularly on social media, where they saw such actions as either acceptable or even protective. This pointed to a lack of understanding about privacy, boundaries, and respect in the digital age.

## Findings

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### Attitudes towards consent

#### Non-verbal consent

There was a misconception around understanding consent, particularly regarding non-verbal cues. One participant explained, "**If the girl smiles, it's giving consent,**" Similarly, another participant said, silence represents "extra time to decide," rather than a potential refusal.

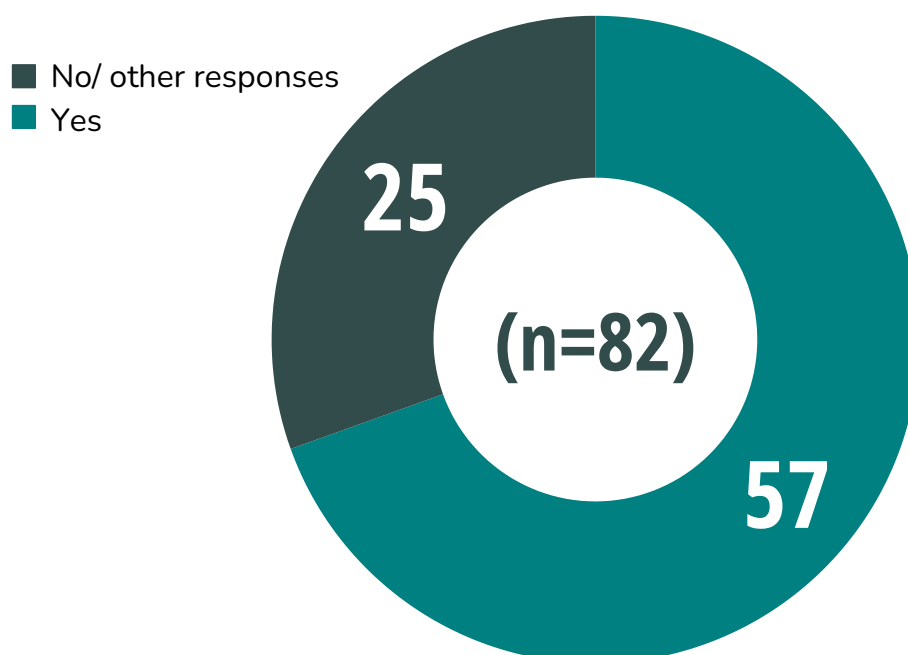


Figure 3: Are non-verbal cues, such as smiling, as a form of consent?

57 out of 82 boys said non-verbal cues, such as smiling, as forms of consent. One participant explained, **"If she blushes and says 'no' with a smile, we think it's a yes,"** while another added, **"If a girl says no while smiling, it means she's just shy and probably means yes."**

Another belief was the idea that a girl's "no" accompanied by a smile indicates pressure to refuse. One participant shared, **"If she's shy, she might say no but secretly wants to say yes."**

## Consent in relationships

The boys were divided in their views on consent within romantic relationships. While some participants acknowledged the importance of recognising consent, particularly if their partner appeared uncomfortable, one individual shared, **"If she's uncomfortable, but not saying anything, you should understand it's a no."**

However, others believed that consent was implied once a relationship was established. As one participant stated, **"If she's our girlfriend, she will trust us, so there's no need to ask repeatedly."** 63 out of 82 participants expressed the belief that consent was unnecessary within established relationships.

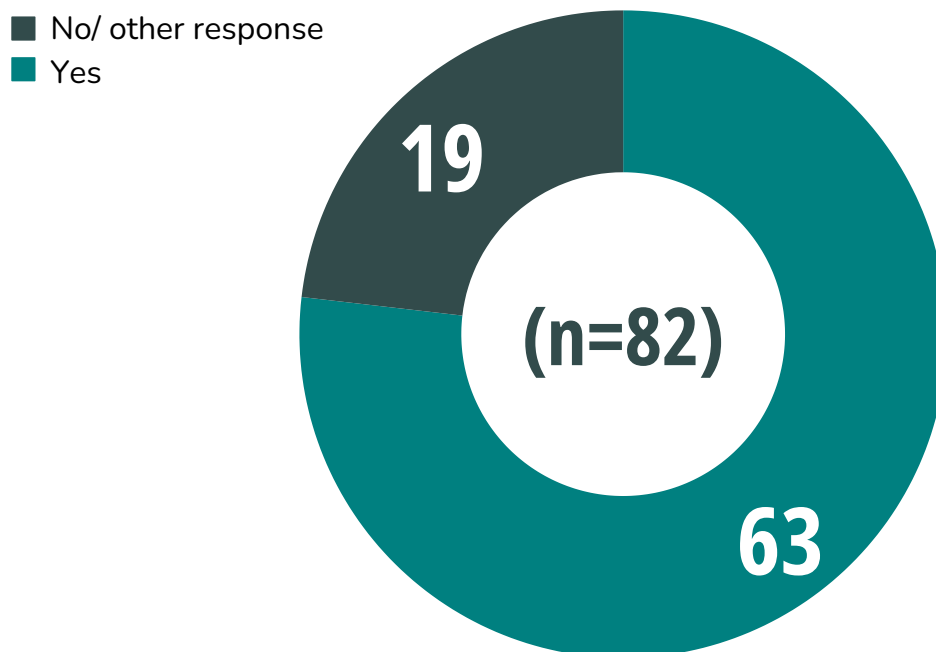


Figure 4: Is consent necessary within established relationships?

One participant stated, **"In a relationship, there is no harassment. It is 'legal'."** Many of the boys equated consent with basic, everyday scenarios—like asking to borrow an item—but struggled to apply the same principle to intimate or romantic contexts. One participant noted, **"When you asked if you could take a photo, and we said yes, that is consent"**.

When discussing physical affection, such as hugging, they believed that no permission should be needed after being in a relationship for a few months.

During the discussions, it also came out that peer pressure significantly influences how boys perceive and act on consent. In efforts to conform to their peer group's expectations, boys may feel compelled to assert dominance or control in their interactions, including disregarding explicit or implied boundaries set by others. One participant said, **"If a girl says 'no' to us, then we are ridiculed by our friends and that is not seen as something respectful"**. Often, boys view seeking verbal consent as a sign of vulnerability or weakness, fearing ridicule or rejection by their peers. Additionally, there was a normalisation of behaviours, such as persisting after a "no" or interpreting silence as agreement.

## Stalking

### Attitudes and understandings

Out of the 82, 47 participants said it is okay to stalk someone once or twice if they liked the person and were interested in them. Further conversations with the participants also showed a normalisation of stalking. Many did not view stalking as problematic, but instead saw it as harmless attention or a sign of affection. One participant stated, **"If he loves her, he can follow her once or twice"**.

The boys blamed the survivors for stalking, suggesting that girls brought it upon themselves by dressing revealingly or acting in certain ways. As one boy explained, **"If a girl wears short clothes, attention will naturally go to her."**

- No/ other response
- Yes

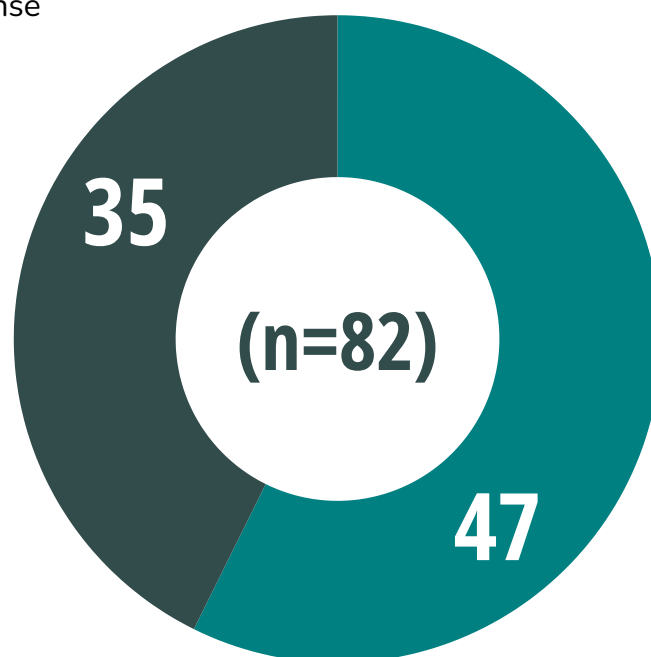


Figure 4: Is it okay to stalk someone once or twice if you like the person and are interested in them?





Many participants believed that boys follow girls based on their external characteristics, such as physical attractiveness, wealth, obedience, and social status.

Many boys viewed stalking as an innocent or acceptable behaviour, especially if it was motivated by "love" or affection. One participant justified following a girl by saying, **"If we like a girl, it's normal to hang around her. Sometimes, we do it to impress her."** They also referred to movies and songs where the 'hero' follows the 'heroine' for expressing his love or to protect her.

59 out of 82 participants denied that stalking had any real impact on the girl being stalked. One boy stated, **"If a girl is coming to show herself, the boy will definitely look at her."**

■ No/ other response  
■ Yes

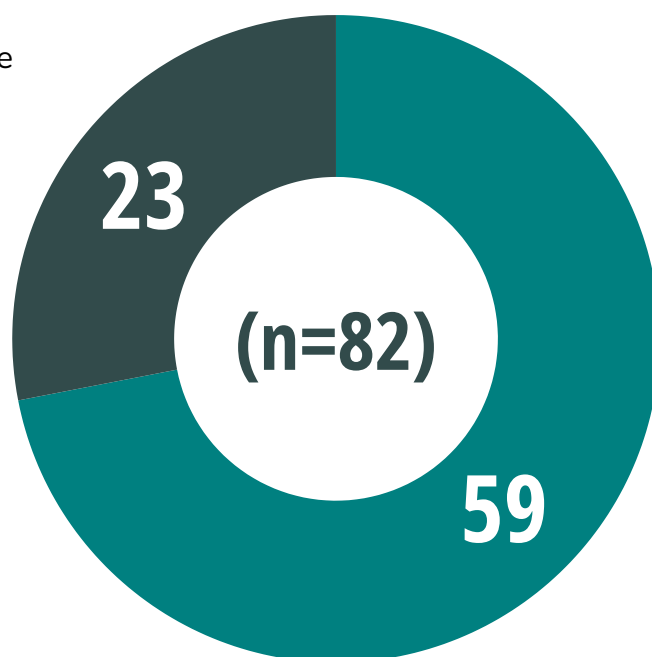


Figure 5: Does stalking have any real impact on the girl being stalked?

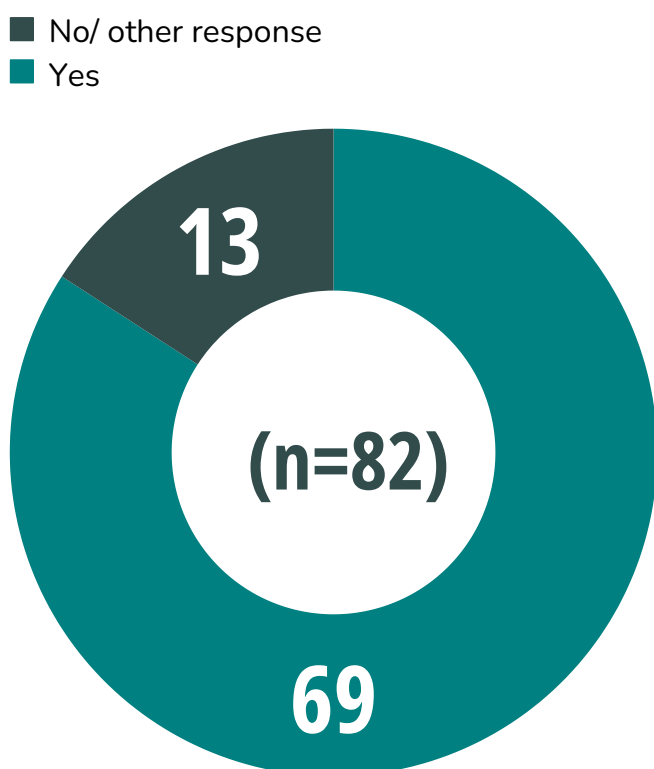


Figure 6: Does a girl's clothing invite harassment?

At the conclusion of several discussions, some participants shared that they had learned behaviours such as stalking from movies and songs, without ever questioning them. They explained that these behaviours were often portrayed as expressions of love and affection in popular media, leading them to view stalking as something normal or even romantic.

## Digital stalking

The boys also showed a lack of understanding regarding privacy and boundaries in the digital age. Many believed it was acceptable to stalk someone's social media profile, especially if the account was public. One participant said, **"They made their accounts public, so they want their profile to be viewed."**

The conversation then shifted to the practice of liking all posts on someone's social media profile at once. 57 out of 82 agreed that it might make the person happy. Some responses included, **"They probably feel good when they get likes"** and **"She will feel that she is being noticed, and the boy is trying to start a conversation, that's why he's liking all the posts."**

69 out of 82 said that if a girl wears a short dress or inappropriate clothing she will be stalked. One participant said, **"A girl should not wear short dresses, should not wear makeup, should behave like Goddess Sita."** The boys predominantly blamed girls for being stalked, citing reasons such as wearing revealing clothes, smoking, drinking, or even socialising without a companion. One boy remarked, **"Girls from wealthy families, those who smoke, drink, or use drugs, are stalked."** Another participant suggested, **"It's the family's fault because they leave them alone. They should be sent with someone - brother, friend, anyone."**

Several participants shared that there are many harmful activities on social media, such as sending vulgar messages and pictures, or pretending to be someone else to talk to others. They pointed out that real identities are often hidden on social media, and that identities—especially those of girls—are frequently misused.

## Views on safety and stalking prevention

At the end of every discussion, participants were asked how stalking culture can be stopped. Addressing this particular question, many participants acknowledged the need for change to prevent stalking for example, “Boys need to change their mindset and way of thinking.” However, most proposed solutions for preventing stalking focused solely on the behaviour of women. For example, suggestions like “A girl should not wear short dresses as some can misunderstand it and can cause problems for the girl,” “Girls should learn self-defence to protect themselves,” “There should be a fixed time for girls to return home; they must return by 4 PM in winter and 5 PM in summer” “Girls should not go to clubs, as they are considered unsafe”, “The police need to be more proactive and take immediate action against any wrongdoing” were a few suggestions given by the participants which can prevent stalking.

# Analysis

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## Attitude towards consent

The findings reveal a significant lack of understanding about consent, particularly regarding the need for clear, verbal, and enthusiastic consent. Many of the boys mistakenly interpret non-verbal cues, such as a smile, believing these can substitute for clear, spoken communication. This misinterpretation leads to harmful assumptions, such as believing that silence or a smile automatically means agreement. However, this overlooks the essential need for explicit, verbal consent. When consent is reduced to something as vague as a smile or silence, it normalises coercion and dismisses women’s autonomy. It suggests that women’s refusals are not genuine, implying their true feelings are often concealed. This mindset diminishes the importance of a woman’s clear refusal and further reinforces the harmful belief that women’s boundaries are negotiable or unimportant.

Moreover, there is a lack of understanding about how consent should operate continuously within relationships. Some believe that being in a relationship automatically grants a partner the right to access their body, neglecting the ongoing need for mutual respect and communication. Consent should not be treated as a one-time agreement for specific activities—it must be respected at all times, even during intimate moments. The idea that affection and physical touch are automatic and do not require explicit consent shows how much further we need to go in recognising personal boundaries and bodily autonomy. This underscores the urgent need for better education on how to respect boundaries and ensure that both partners feel safe, comfortable, and heard throughout all stages of a relationship.

## Attitude towards stalking

The normalisation of stalking is another significant concern highlighted in the findings. Stalking is often downplayed, and its emotional and psychological harm is not taken as seriously as it should be. A culture exists that places blame on the survivor, focusing on the woman's appearance or behaviour, rather than holding the stalker accountable for their actions.

This mindset suggests that women are responsible for preventing harassment by altering their behaviour, which adds to the burden they already face. There is also a deeply troubling notion that a woman's worth is tied to her looks and behaviour, with unwanted attention being portrayed as her fault. This normalises stalking as a form of "love" or "admiration," dangerously blurring the lines between what is appropriate and what is not.

Equally concerning is the tendency to dismiss a woman's discomfort, framing male attention as something inevitable that cannot be avoided. When society shifts the blame onto women and their families, it allows stalking to continue unchecked. The findings also suggest that the media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of stalking and harassment. Rather than recognising these actions as violations of personal boundaries, the media sometimes reinforces harmful behaviours, making them seem normal or even romanticised.

## Stalking on social media

The study highlights a lack of understanding about boundaries and privacy on digital platforms. Social media is another space where stalking is often normalised. Many people mistakenly believe that if someone's profile is public, it automatically invites attention, including unwanted scrutiny. This belief undermines individuals' fundamental right to control who accesses their personal information and how it is used. Some participants argued that liking all of someone's posts is simply an attempt to show interest or get closer to them, but this perspective fails to account for the discomfort or harm such behaviour can cause. It shifts the responsibility to women, suggesting they must be cautious about how they present themselves online in order to avoid being stalked or harassed.

This perpetuates the harmful idea that women must constantly guard themselves by conforming to specific standards of behaviour to avoid unwanted attention or harassment. However, the truth is that even women and girls dressed in what society deems 'appropriate' clothing—whether formal or modest attire—are still frequently targeted by harassment, showing that no attire can guarantee protection.

## Solutions to prevent stalking

The solutions proposed by some adolescent boys to prevent stalking highlight a concerning perspective. Many suggestions, such as "Girls should not stay out too late," "Girls should not work night shifts," or "A family member should always accompany a girl when she goes out," centre on restricting women's freedom. These suggestions place the responsibility for safety solely on women, implying they need constant monitoring or control to stay safe. This approach fails to address the root cause of the issue—the need to change in behaviour of the perpetrator and be held accountable for respecting boundaries.

The belief that women must avoid certain behaviours, places, or even people to stay safe only increases the pressure on women. It wrongly suggests that if women are harassed or stalked, it is due to their actions or decisions, rather than addressing the broader societal issue of respecting personal boundaries. Women should not have to constantly modify their lives in an effort to avoid harassment. Society must shift its focus not only on restricting women's autonomy but also on changing the attitudes and behaviours of those perpetuating such harmful actions.

The findings point to an urgent need to engage adolescent boys in conversations that challenge these ingrained beliefs. Creating safe spaces where boys can freely express themselves, question societal norms, and reflect on their behaviours is crucial. Such spaces foster an environment where boys can explore their vulnerabilities without judgement and develop empathy and accountability. Discussions must focus not just on the mechanics of consent, but also on building respect for autonomy and boundaries in relationships.

Additionally, there is a pressing need to challenge traditional notions of masculinity. By redefining what it means to be “masculine,” boys can move away from ideals of dominance and aggression toward values of empathy, cooperation, and mutual respect. Promoting these traits as strengths will encourage boys to resist peer pressure and adopt healthier, more equitable behaviours.

## Conclusion

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The study underscores the pressing need to address how adolescent boys understand consent, boundaries, and respect for women's autonomy. It reveals significant gaps in awareness and the perpetuation of harmful behaviours that stem from societal norms, peer influences, and media portrayals.

A major insight is that many boys lack clarity on the meaning and importance of consent. Non-verbal cues, such as a smile or silence, are often misinterpreted as agreement. This misjudgment demonstrates an inability to recognise that explicit verbal communication is fundamental in establishing mutual consent. Furthermore, some participants held the belief that being in a relationship negates the necessity for ongoing consent, implying that boundaries are automatically diminished within such dynamics. This highlights a critical flaw in understanding that consent must be continuous.

Another striking observation is the acceptance of stalking behaviours, both online and offline. Many boys perceive persistent attention as a sign of admiration, influenced heavily by media representations that romanticise such actions. The lack of understanding for how these behaviours affect the targeted individual is concerning. Instead of viewing stalking as intrusive or harmful, boys often justify it through their own intentions, disregarding its negative impact on others.

Peer pressure is a powerful force shaping behaviours, with boys conforming to toxic notions of masculinity that glorify dominance and aggression. The desire to gain social approval often overrides individual judgement, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. At the same time, boys are rarely provided with safe spaces to explore their vulnerabilities or question these pressures. This absence of a supportive environment perpetuates cycles of conformity and restricts opportunities for growth and change.

Deep-seated cultural beliefs that place the responsibility of preventing harassment on women further compound the problem. Many boys adopt victim-blaming attitudes, suggesting that girls must dress or behave a certain way to avoid unwanted attention. These views are reinforced by cultural narratives and media that glorify male persistence as a form of romance, skewing boys' understanding of respect and mutual consent.

The role of the media cannot be overlooked. Boys should be equipped with the skills to critically analyse harmful narratives in films, songs, and social media that perpetuate toxic behaviours. Simultaneously, there is a societal responsibility to advocate for more constructive portrayals of relationships and masculinity in popular culture.

In conversations during the study, it was observed that when a male facilitator led the discussions, boys responded more openly, feeling a sense of safety to discuss these critical issues. This highlights the importance of more men taking on the role of engaging with young adolescent boys, as it encourages them to question, reflect, and engage in deeper, more meaningful conversations.

Further, there is a strong need to create positive role models for adolescent boys. While many young men often look to pop culture for inspiration, many others are actively working to create safe, gender-just, and inclusive spaces for all. Their efforts deserve to be highlighted on a larger platform. Introducing local and regional young male leaders to adolescent boys can help create spaces for meaningful discussions. These forums would provide opportunities for open expression, idea exchange, and critical conversations on topics like consent and personal boundaries.



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