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A WAR AGAINST BOYS?

by Michael Kimmel

By now, you've probably heard there's a "war against boys" in America. The latest heavily-hyped right-wing fusillade against feminism, led by Christina Hoff Sommers's new book of that title, **claims that men are now the second sex and that boys--not girls--are the ones who are in serious trouble, the "victims" of "misguided" feminist efforts to protect and promote girls' development.** At the same time, best-selling books by therapists, like William Pollack's REAL BOYS and Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson's RAISING CAIN, also sound the same tocsin, warning of alarming levels of depression and suicide among boys, and describing boys' interior lives as an emotionally barren landscape, with all affect suppressed beneath postures of false bravado. They counsel anguished parents to "rescue" or "protect" boys--not from feminists but from a definition of masculinity that is harmful to boys, girls, and other living things.

In part, they're both right. There IS a crisis among boys. But the right-wing jeremiads misdiagnose the cause of the crisis and thus their proposed reforms would take us even further away from enabling young boys to negotiate the difficult path to a manhood of integrity, ethical commitment, and compassion. At least the therapists get that part right. But, in part, both sides are also wrong: on most measures boys--at least the middle class white boys everyone seems concerned about--are doing just fine, taking the places in an **unequal society to which they have always felt entitled.**

THE BOY CRISIS

Let's begin with the evidence of crisis. The signs are everywhere. Boys drop out of school, are diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, and commit suicide four times more often than girls; they get into fights twice as often; they murder ten times more frequently and are fifteen times more likely to be the victims of a violent crime. Boys are six times more likely to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder. Boys get lower grades on standardized tests of reading and writing, and have lower class rank and fewer honors than girls.

On college campuses, women now constitute the majority of students, passing men in 1982, so that in eight years **women will earn 58 percent of bachelor's degrees in U.S. colleges.** **Doomsayers lament that women now outnumber men in the social and behavioral sciences by about 3 to 1, and they've "invaded" such traditionally male bastions as engineering (where they now make up 20 percent of all students) and biology and business (virtually par).**

Elementary schools, we hear, are "anti-boy," emphasizing reading and restricting the movements of young boys. They "feminize" boys, forcing active, healthy, and naturally rambunctious boys to conform to a regime of obedience, "pathologizing what is simply normal for boys," as one psychologist put it. Michael Gurian argues in *THE WONDER OF BOYS* that despite the testosterone surging through their little limbs, we demand that boys sit still, raise their hands, and take naps. We're giving them the message, he says, that "boyhood is defective."

According to Christina Hoff Sommers, it's "misguided feminism" that's been spreading such calumnies about boys. It's boys, not girls, who face the much-discussed "chilly classroom climate," according to Sommers. Schools are an "inhospitable," hostile environment for boys, where their natural propensities for rough and tumble play, competition, aggression, and rambunctious violence are cast as social problems in the making.

"Misguided" feminists have ignored the natural biological differences between boys and girls, and, in their fear and loathing of all things masculine, have demeaned an entire sex. Sommers quotes a line from a speech by Gloria Steinem that "we need to raise boys like we raise girls." (In fact, she quotes it three times in her short, but repetitive book.) She vilifies William Pollack, author of *REAL BOYS*, and others (including myself) for our efforts to "save the males"--to rescue boys from the dangerous myths of masculinity. Boys, she argues, are simply different from girls, and efforts to transform time-tested and beneficial definitions of masculinity will run counter to nature's plan. Categorical differences are "natural, healthy, and, by implication, best left alone."

On the other hand, Sommers reserves her fiercest animus for Carol Gilligan, whose work on girls' development suggests that there is more than one moral voice which guides people in their ethical decision-making, and who has explored the ways in which girls lose their voice as they approach adolescence. In fact, Sommers is so filled with misplaced rage at Gilligan that one is tempted to speculate about her motives, accusing Gilligan of ethical impropriety in her research, duplicity, intellectual fraud, and deceptive cover-ups. (This because Gilligan won't show her raw field notes and interview transcripts to some smarmy Harvard undergraduate who did not identify himself as working for Sommers.)

But Sommers goes after Gilligan precisely because Sommers believes (based on a misreading of the work) that Gilligan posits categorically different moral voices for boys and girls. Here, Sommers offers evidence that the differences between boys and girls are minimal. **When she discusses boys' aggression, those same testosterone-propelled, hard-wired, natural sex differences magically disappear. "[S]chool problems have very little to do with misogyny, patriarchy, or sex discrimination," she writes. "They have everything to do with CHILDREN'S propensity to bully and be cruel"** (my emphasis).

So which is it? She attacks the therapists for failing to recognize the hard-wired differences between the sexes, but then excoriates Gilligan for crediting those same differences.

MISGUIDED ANTI-FEMINISM AS MISDIAGNOSIS

Anyone who has kids in school today knows that some of this appears true: some boys seem defensive, morose, unfocused, taciturn, and withdrawn, while the girls in their classes seem to be sailing on towards bright and multifaceted futures, performing science experiments, playing soccer, and delivering valedictory addresses. So, what's wrong with Sommers' picture?

In addition to its internal contradictions, Sommers and the boys-as-victims crowd make several key errors. For one thing, though driven to distraction by numbers, Sommers, Gurian, and others never factor in the number zero--as in zero dollars for new public school programs, the dearth of school bond issues that have passed, the absence of money from which might have developed remedial programs, intervention strategies, teacher training. Money which might have prevented cutting school sports programs and after-school extracurricular activities. Money which might have enabled teachers and administrators to do more than "store" problem students in separate classes. Far larger portions of those school budgets go towards programming for boys (special education, school sports) than for girls. So much for feminization. (This mirrors apparent national priorities: we can't seem to pass any school bond issues, but we'll tax ourselves into the next millennium to build a new sports stadium.) Nor do they mention managed care health insurance, which virtually demands that school psychologists diagnose problem behavior as a treatable medical condition so that drugs may be substituted for costly, "unnecessary" therapy.

And what about the numbers of boys going to college? Well, for one thing, more PEOPLE are going to college than ever before. In 1960, 54 percent of boys and 38 percent of girls went directly to college; today the numbers are 64 percent of boys and 70 percent of girls. And while some college presidents fret that to increase male enrollments they'll be forced to lower standards (which is, incidentally, exactly the opposite of what they worried about twenty-five years ago when they all went coeducational) no one seems to find gender disparities going the other way all that upsetting. Of the top colleges and universities in the nation, only Stanford sports a 50-50 gender balance. Harvard and Amherst enroll 56 percent men, Princeton and Chicago 54 percent men, Duke and Berkeley 52 percent and Yale 51 percent. And that doesn't even begin to approach the gender disparities at Cal Tech (65 percent male, 35 percent female) or MIT (62 percent male, 38 percent female). Nor does anyone seem driven to distraction about the gender disparities in nursing, social work, or education. Did somebody say "what about the girls?" Should we lower standards to make sure they're gender balanced?

Much of the gender difference offered is actually what sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein calls a "deceptive distinction," a difference that appears to be about gender but is actually about something else--in this case, class or race. Girls' vocational opportunities are far more restricted than boys' are. Their opportunities are from the service sector, with limited openings in manufacturing or construction. A college-educated woman earns about the same as a high school educated man, \$31,000 to \$35,000. Note, too, that the shortage of male college students is actually a shortage of NON-WHITE males. The actual gender gap between college-

age white males and white females is rather small, 51 percent women to 49 percent men. But only 37 percent of black college students are male compared with 63 percent female, and only 45 percent of Hispanic students are male, compared with 55 percent female.

These differences among boys--by race or class, for example--do not typically fall within the radar of the cultural critics who would rescue boys. These differences are incidental because, in their eyes, all boys are the same: aggressive, competitive, rambunctious little devils. They argue that testosterone makes boys into boys, and that our society fails by making it impossible for boys to be boys.

Now, personally, I find those words, "boys will be boys" (which, incidentally, are the final four words of Sommers' book) to be four of the most depressing words in policy circles today, because they suggest resignation, a hopeless throwing up of the hands. If boys will be boys, then there is simply nothing we can do about it.

RETHINKING MASCULINITY

"Masculinity is aggressive, unstable, combustible," writes Camille Paglia, whom Sommers quotes approvingly, in one of the most insulting--yes, male-bashing--definitions available. Are we hard-wired only for aggression and competition? Are we not also hard-wired for compassion, nurturance, love?

The therapists (Pollack, Kindlon, and Thompson) understand that what lies beneath boys' problems (apparent or real) is an outdated ideology of masculinity to which boys are struggling desperately to adhere, and which is applied ruthlessly and coercively by other boys.

For example, the reason it appears that boys are lagging behind in reading and languages is not because of feminist efforts to improve the lives of girls, nor even because testosterone inhibits the memorization of French syntax. It's about an ideology of masculinity.

Consider the parallel for girls. Gilligan's often moving work on adolescent girls describes how these assertive, confident, and proud youngsters "lose their voices" when they hit adolescence. At the same moment, Pollack notes, boys become MORE confident, even beyond their abilities. You might even say that boys FIND their voices, but it is the inauthentic voice of bravado, of constant posturing, of foolish risk-taking and gratuitous violence. The Boy Code teaches them that they are supposed to be in power, and thus begin to act like it. They "ruffle in a manly pose," as William Butler Yeats once put it, "for all their timid heart."

What's the cause of all this posturing and posing? It's not testosterone, but privilege. In adolescence both boys and girls get their first real dose of gender inequality: girls suppress ambition, boys inflate it.

Recent research on the gender gap in school achievement bears this out. Girls are more likely to undervalue their abilities, especially in the more traditionally "masculine" educational arenas

such as math and science. Only the most able and most secure girls take such courses. Thus, their numbers tend to be few, and their grades high. Boys, however, possessed of this false voice of bravado (and many facing strong family pressure) are likely to OVER VALUE their abilities, to remain in programs though they are less qualified and capable of succeeding.

This difference, and not some putative discrimination against boys, is the reason that girls' mean test scores in math and science are now, on average, approaching that of boys. Too many boys who over value their abilities remain in difficult math and science courses longer than they should; they pull the boys' mean scores down. By contrast, the few girls whose abilities and self-esteem are sufficient to enable them to "trespass" into a male domain skew female data upwards.

A parallel process is at work in the humanities and social sciences. Girls' test scores in English and foreign languages outpace boys not because of some "reverse discrimination," but because the boys bump up against the norms of masculinity. Boys regard English as a "feminine" subject. Pioneering research in Australia by Wayne Martino found that boys are uninterested in English because of what it might say about their (inauthentic) masculine pose. "Reading is lame, sitting down and looking at words is pathetic," commented one boy. "Most guys who like English are faggots." The traditional liberal arts curriculum is seen as feminizing; as Catharine Stimpson recently put it sarcastically, "real men don't speak French."

Boys tend to hate English and foreign languages for the same reasons that girls love it. In English, they observe, there are no hard and fast rules, but rather one expresses one's opinion about the topic and everyone's opinion is equally valued. "The answer can be a variety of things, you're never really wrong," observed one boy. "It's not like math and science where there is one set answer to everything." Another boy noted:

"I find English hard. It's because there are no set rules for reading texts....English isn't like math where you have rules on how to do things and where there are right and wrong answers. In English you have to write down how you feel and that's what I don't like."

Compare this to the comments of girls in the same study:

"I feel motivated to study English because...you have freedom in English--unlike subjects such as math and science--and your view isn't necessarily wrong. There is no definite right or wrong answer and you have the freedom to say what you feel is right without it being rejected as a wrong answer."

It is not the school experience that "feminizes" boys, but rather the ideology of traditional masculinity that keeps boys from wanting to succeed. "The work you do here is girls' work," one boy commented to a British researcher. "It's not real work."

Ideologies of masculinity are reinforced ruthlessly on playgrounds and in classrooms all across the country. Boys who do like school, or who don't like sports, or who dress or act "different,"

are often subject to a constant barrage of insults, harassment, beatings. School may become an interminable torment. Students at Columbine High School described how the jocks beat up Eric Harris every day. This isn't playful rambunctious rough and tumble play: it's harassment, and is actionable under the law. And if masculinity is so "natural" and hard-wired, why does it have to be enforced with so much constant coercion?

Efforts to improve boys' lives in school will either adequately address the cultural--not natural--equation of masculinity and anti-intellectualism or they will fail.

And that leads to the final and most telling problem with these works: They assert a false opposition between girls and boys, pretending that the educational reforms undertaken to enable girls to perform better actually hindered boys' educational development. But these reforms--new initiatives, classroom configurations, teacher training, increased attentiveness to students' processes and individual learning styles--actually enable larger numbers of boys to get a better education. As Susan McGee Bailey and Patricia Campbell point out, "gender stereotypes, particularly those related to education, hurt both girls and boys," while the challenging of those stereotypes, decreased tolerance for school violence and bullying, and increased attention to violence at home actually enables BOTH girls AND boys to feel safer at school.

Since Sommers quotes Gloria Steinem's statement no less than three times, out of context, it might be interesting to conclude with what Steinem actually did say:

"We've begun to raise our daughters more like sons--so now women are whole people. But fewer of us have the courage to raise our sons more like daughters. Yet until men raise children as much as women do--and are raised to raise children, whether or not they become fathers--they will have a far harder time developing in themselves those human qualities that are wrongly called 'feminine.'"

Hardly a call for androgyny--she seeks to degender traits, not people--Steinem reminds us of the most vital connection between parents and children, the centrality of caring, nurturing parenting as the fulfillment of our ethical responsibilities, and suggests that the signal success of feminism has been to raise girls to become competent, confident, and strong-minded. Would that our boys could achieve those traits.

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