



Boys *Under* Attack

Christina Hoff Sommers was right

By Karina Rollins

Three years ago, Christina Hoff Sommers presented a radically titled book, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. Back then, a war against boys seemed an odd charge in a society that had accepted as fact the leftist feminist claim that boys are, by definition, beneficiaries of the reigning “patriarchy,” and girls, second-class citizens. After all, esteemed institutions like the Association of American University Women had commissioned studies that showed widespread “gender bias” against girls in school, and television and newspapers were filled with authoritative-sounding reports hammering home gut-wrenching stories of short-changed girls robbed of their self-esteem, left miserable and suicidal.

What was the evidence for these claims? As Sommers discerned from painstaking research, they stood on shaky ground at best; at worst, they were wholesale perversions of fact. Far from the constant claims that school is designed to suit boys’ needs at the expense of girls’, Sommers showed that when it comes to education, “we have a genuinely worrisome gender gap, with boys well behind girls”:

Girls read more books. They outperform males on tests of artistic and musical ability. More girls than boys study abroad. More join the Peace Corps. Conversely, more boys than girls are suspended from school. More are held back and more drop out. Boys are three times as likely as girls to be enrolled in special education programs and

four times as likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). More boys than girls are involved in crime, alcohol and drugs. Girls attempt suicide more than boys, but it is boys who actually kill themselves more often. In a typical year (1997), there were 4,493 suicides of young people between the ages of five and 24: 701 females, 3,792 males.

But these facts—and an abundance of other evidence disputing the cry of anti-girl discrimination—did little to quell the thirst for girl salvation. While the mainstream media trumpeted that study commissioned by the AAUW proclaiming girlhood misery, studies and reports demonstrating its grave flaws and misinformation, as well as Sommers’ *The War Against Boys*, were barely mentioned.

Other sob stories about the sorry lot of girls didn’t even have faulty studies to back them up—they were simply asserted, and accepted, unquestioningly, by much of the media and the American public. “The research commonly cited to support the claims of male privilege and sinfulness is riddled with errors,” Sommers charged in 2000. “Almost none of it has been published in professional peer-reviewed journals. Some of the data are mysteriously missing. Yet the false picture remains and is dutifully passed along in schools of education, in ‘gender-equity’ workshops, and increasingly to children themselves.”

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Karina Rollins is a TAE senior editor.

Thus the feminists were able to continue their crusade undeterred by reality. The problem with their ideology is not the promotion of girls, but that it comes in the form of utter neglect of the burgeoning number of young males who are left behind. As even male feminist William Pollock, a Harvard psychiatry professor and author of *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, recognizes today: "It's not just that boys are falling behind girls. It's that boys themselves are falling behind their own functioning and doing worse than they did before."

A signal that reality might eventually win out over ideology is the recent spate of reports in the mainstream press corroborating Christina Sommers' research. In May, *Business Week* featured a cover story "The New Gender Gap." The article's author, Michelle Conlin, does not mince words; she writes plainly of "a stunning gender reversal in American education. From kindergarten to graduate school, boys are fast becoming the second sex." As Conlin puts it: "It may still be a man's world. But it is no longer a boy's.... Biologically, [a boy] needs four recesses a day, but he's lucky if he gets one, since some lawsuit-leery schools have banned them altogether. Hug a girl, and he could be labeled a 'toucher' and swiftly suspended—a result of what some say is an increasingly anti-boy culture that pathologizes their behavior."

Conlin lists the gamut of boyhood woes, from the fact that 70 percent of special-ed students are boys, to their absence on honor rolls, to the 30 percent higher dropout rate and a host of social pathologies. That more young women than men go to college and earn degrees is a decades-old phenomenon. And this development holds true across "every state, every income bracket, every racial and ethnic group," as Conlin points out. The famous number recently quoted by magazines and newspapers across the country is that 133 girls receive BAs for every 100 men. If this trend continues, by 2020 that number will be 156.

Three decades ago, education experts hoped that the "Girl Project" would close the much-publicized boy-girl gaps in math and science. The gap has indeed narrowed. But in the 1990s, when boys were quitting school in unheard-of numbers and a gaping canyon separated their reading and writing skills from girls', the public message of male domination did not budge an inch. Politically charged, the notion of suffering girls had grown into an industry. As Steve Hanson, principal of Ottumwa High School in Iowa, explains: "All the focus was on girls, all the grant monies, all the university programs—to get girls interested in science and math. There wasn't a similar thing for reading and writing for boys."

The reality of mismanaged and damaged boys has hit home with several on the Left, such as *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen. "It's clear that something very bad is happening to boys," he wrote recently. Cohen recites the Cliff's Notes litany of young male social problems and academic inferiority to women

and laments: "Not only do boys continue to be taught by women who think that they are just unruly girls, but girls are now purposely favored." In recognition of a feminized, sensitive, high-tech culture, he declares: "In a society that no longer needs brawn, or values aggression—that is, in some respects, more feminine—girls are better endowed by nature to succeed."

Cohen seems resigned to accepting this status quo as an immutable fact of modern life, as the new nature. But it is entirely due to the successful feminist agenda that over the past few decades teachers have come to treat boys less and less like boys, and more and more like girls—and expected them to behave accordingly. The feminist ideology has made any male virtues disreputable. Instead of channeling boys' natural aggressiveness into positive arenas, their innate nature is ignored, suppressed, and wished away. What is so dangerous about the feminized worldview of male nature is that when treated with respect and discipline, boys can learn appropriate behavior and mature into normal healthy men. But when treated with disdain and demands to be girls with penises, boys will lose their bearings and most likely act out in destructive ways.

"How our culture binds boys in a 'straightjacket of masculinity' had suddenly become a fashionable topic," in the mid '90s, wrote Sommers. Intellectuals wielding great influence in education circles promoted a movement to "save the males" from the horrors of masculinity, and they poured their energy into "conferences, workshops, and institutes dedicated to transforming boys." Forcing girls to act like boys would horrify most decent people. Yet the reverse, and its perverse consequences, have permeated virtually the entire education establishment in this country.

It's not surprising, then, that tales of restless and boisterous boys disturbing classrooms and recess have been mounting for years. More and more boys are put on Ritalin or other drugs to correct their behavior, with little or no distinction made by experts between real misbehavior and normal boyish rambunctiousness.

The bad news is clear. The good news is that these developments are not irreversible. Just a few years ago Christina Hoff Sommers was called an extremist for the facts she presented in *The War Against Boys*. Today, her observations are entering the conventional wisdom. If more parents and teachers will revolt against the feminist-driven demonization of boys—fighting the idea that specifically male behavior, and any degree of aggressiveness, are intrinsically bad and to be rooted out—sanity can be restored.

"It has become fashionable to attribute pathology to millions of healthy male children," warned Sommers three years ago. "We are turning against boys and forgetting a simple truth: that the energy, competitiveness, and corporal daring of normal, decent males is responsible for much of what is right in the world."

Let's hear it for the boys.



**Boys
are not
merely girls
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penises.**

