

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## ***Men Adrift: The Unfolding Cultural Crisis***

More than 90% of presidents and prime ministers are men, as are nearly all corporate executives. In some areas of culture, men arguably dominate (e.g., finance, technology, film, sports). But that reality is changing—and rather rapidly. In fact, although men cluster at the top of worldwide culture, they also cluster at the bottom. Men are far more likely to be in jail, be estranged from their children or to commit suicide. In these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, men earn fewer university degrees than women, and are 50% more than likely to flunk basic math, reading and science. As *The Economist* reports, “The result, for low-skilled men, is a poisonous combination of no job, no family and no prospects.”

Here are some rather frightening facts about men (and boys) drawn from a March 2015 report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD):

- Until the 1960s boys spent longer and went further in school than girls, and were more likely to graduate from the university. Across both rich and poor nations, the balance has tilted the other way.
- In all 64 nations and economies studied by the OECD, girls outperform boys. The average gap is equivalent to an extra year of schooling.
- Teenage boys are 50% more likely than girls to fail to achieve basic proficiency in math, reading or science. Such boys are thus more than likely to drop out of school altogether.
- The average 15-year old girl devotes five-and-a-half hours a week to homework, an hour more than the average boy, who spends more time playing video games and probing the internet. “Reading rates are falling everywhere as screens draw eyes from pages, but boys are giving up faster.”
- Boys are twice as likely as girls to report that school is a “waste of time,” and more often turn up late to school.
- Boys are more likely than girls to be forced to repeat a year in school, even when they are of equal ability.
- Girls’ educational dominance persists after school. Worldwide enrollment has increased almost twice as fast as men’s. In the OECD report, women make up 56% of students enrolled, up from 46% in 1985. By 2025 that might rise to 58%. In America, Britain, and parts of Scandinavia, there are 50% more women than men on college campuses. In such colleges and universities, women are more than likely to graduate and typically get better grades than men.
- The contraceptive pill and a decline in the average number of children, together with later marriage and childbearing, have made it easier for married women to join the workforce.

For women, rising divorce rates have underlined the importance of being able to provide for oneself.

- Today, in the United States, pay for men with only a high school diploma fell by 21% in real terms between 1979 and 2013; for women with similar qualifications it rose by 3%. American men without jobs spend only half as much time on housework and caring for others as do women in the same situation, and much more time watching television.

*The Economist* concludes that the “working class family is unraveling.” The two-parent family is still somewhat the norm among the elite, but is vanishing among the poor. In rich countries, the proportion of births outside marriage has tripled since 1980 to 33%. In some areas where traditional manufacturing has collapsed, it has reached 70% or more. Children raised in broken homes learn less in school, are more than likely to drop out of school and earn less later on than children from intact families. They are also not good at forming stable homes of their own. Further, boys who grow up without fathers are more likely to have trouble forming lasting relationships, creating a cycle of male dysfunction. Hanna Rosin, whose 2012 book, *The End of Men and the Rise of Women*, speaks of an emerging culture of “plastic women,” who adapt deftly to economic and social change, and of “cardboard men,” who fail to adapt and are left crumbled.

What are we to do? Recently, Christina Hoff Sommers documented what is happening to boys in our educational system. Citing an article in *The Journal of Human Resources*, she demonstrates that teachers of classes as early as kindergarten factor good behavior into grades—and girls, as a rule, behave themselves far better than boys. In fact, this study also shows that boys across all racial groups and in all major subject areas (from kindergarten through fifth grade) received lower grades than their test scores would have predicted. Sommers summarizes: “The scholars attributed this ‘mismanagement’ to differences in ‘noncognitive skills’: attentiveness, persistence, eagerness to learn, the ability to sit still and work independently. As most parents know, girls tend to develop these skills earlier and more naturally than boys.” Since no study has demonstrated so persuasively that the well-known gender gap in school grades begins so early and is almost entirely attributable to differences in behavior, I believe it is worthwhile for me to summarize other salient findings from this study and from Sommers’s work:

1. The researchers found that teachers rated boys as less proficient even when the boys did just as well as girls on tests of reading, math and science. If the teachers had not accounted for classroom behavior, the boys’ grades, like the girls’, would have matched their test scores.
2. Sommers argues that boy-averse trends like the decline of recess, zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, the tendency to criminalize minor juvenile misconduct and the turn away from single-sex schooling have harmed boys and their development as men. Further, she maintains, as our schools have become more feelings-centered, risk-averse, collaboration-oriented and sedentary, they have moved further and further from boys’ characteristic sensibilities.

3. Sommers quotes Christopher M. Cornwell of the University of Georgia: “If grade disparities emerge this early on, it’s not surprising that by the time these children are ready to go to college, girls will be better positioned.”

4. Improving the performance of black, Latino and lower-income kids requires particular attention to the boys. Black women are nearly twice as likely to earn a college degree as black men. At some historically black colleges, the gap is astounding: Fisk is now 64% female; Howard 67%; Clark Atlanta 75%. An examination of the Boston public schools recently showed that for the graduating class of 2007, there were 197 black girls for every 100 boys planning to attend college; among Hispanics, the ratio was 175 girls for every 100 boys; and among whites, 153 girls for every 100 boys.

5. Sommers suggests the following initiatives to help improve boys’ educational achievement: More boy-friendly assignments, more recess, campaigns to encourage male literacy, more single-sex classes, and more male teachers.

Sommers concludes her article with this wise counsel: “I became a feminist in the 1970s because I did not appreciate male chauvinism. I still don’t. But the proper corrective to chauvinism is not to reverse it and practice it against males, but rather basic fairness. And fairness today requires us to address the serious educational deficits of boys and young men. The rise of women, however long overdue, does not require the fall of men.”

Conclusion: God has given humanity clear teaching on the respective differences between a man and a woman. The “feminization” of culture has produced disastrous results for boys and therefore for men. Few would doubt that correctives within culture were needed to foster greater equality and equality of opportunity for women—but not at the expense of men (and boys). In God’s eyes, men and women are equal (see Genesis 1:26ff; Galatians 3:28 and 1 Peter 3:17). But He created them differently. As Sommers and the OECD study have demonstrated (unintentionally I suspect), our educational system is ignoring those created differences. When that teaching is ignored, dysfunction and catastrophe follow—a perfect description of much of culture in 2015.

See Christina Hoff Sommers in the *New York Times* “Review” section (3 February 2013) and *The Economist* (7 March and 30 May 2015).