

The War Against Boys



This we think we know: American schools favor boys and grind down girls. The truth is the very opposite. By virtually every measure, girls are thriving in school; it is boys who are the second sex

by Christina Hoff Sommers

IT'S a bad time to be a boy in America. The triumphant victory of the U.S. women's soccer team at the World Cup last summer has come to symbolize the spirit of American girls. The shooting at Columbine High last spring might be said to symbolize the spirit of American boys.

That boys are in disrepute is not accidental. For many years women's groups have complained that boys benefit from a school system that favors them and is biased against girls. "Schools shortchange girls," declares the [American Association of University Women](#). Girls are "undergoing a kind of psychological foot-binding," two prominent educational psychologists say. A stream of books and pamphlets cite research showing not only that boys are classroom favorites but also that they are given to schoolyard violence and sexual harassment.

In the view that has prevailed in American education over the past decade, boys are resented, both as the unfairly privileged sex and as obstacles on the path to gender justice for girls. This perspective is promoted in schools of education, and many a teacher now feels that girls need and deserve special indemnifying consideration. "It is really clear that boys are Number One in this society and in most of the world," says [Patricia O'Reilly](#), a professor of education and the director of the Gender Equity Center, at the University of Cincinnati.

The idea that schools and society grind girls down has given rise to an array of laws and policies intended to curtail the advantage boys have and to redress the harm done to girls. That girls are treated as the second sex in school and consequently suffer, that boys are accorded privileges and consequently benefit -- these are things everyone is presumed to know. But they are not true.

The research commonly cited to support claims of male privilege and male sinfulness is riddled with errors. Almost none of it has been published in peer-reviewed professional journals. Some of the data turn out to be mysteriously missing. A review of the facts shows boys, not girls, on the weak side of an education gender gap. The typical boy is a year and a half behind the typical girl in reading and writing; he is less committed to school and less likely to go to college. In 1997 college full-time enrollments were 45 percent male and 55 percent female. The Department of Education predicts that the proportion of boys in college classes will continue to shrink.

Data from the U.S. Department of Education and from several recent university studies show that far from being shy and demoralized, today's girls outshine boys. They get better grades. They have higher educational aspirations. They follow more-rigorous academic programs and participate in advanced-placement classes at higher rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, slightly more girls than boys enroll in high-level math and science courses. Girls, allegedly timorous and lacking in confidence, now outnumber boys in student government, in honor societies, on school newspapers, and in debating clubs. Only in sports are boys

ahead, and women's groups are targeting the sports gap with a vengeance. Girls read more books. They outperform boys on tests for artistic and musical ability. More girls than boys study abroad. More join the Peace Corps. At the same time, more boys than girls are suspended from school. More are held back and more drop out. Boys are three times as likely to receive a diagnosis of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. More boys than girls are involved in crime, alcohol, and drugs. Girls attempt suicide more often than boys, but it is boys who more often succeed. In 1997, a typical year, 4,483 young people aged five to twenty-four committed suicide: 701 females and 3,782 males.

In the technical language of education experts, girls are academically more "engaged." Last year an article in *The CQ Researcher* about male and female academic achievement described a common parental observation: "Daughters want to please their teachers by spending extra time on projects, doing extra credit, making homework as neat as possible. Sons rush through homework assignments and run outside to play, unconcerned about how the teacher will regard the sloppy work."

School engagement is a critical measure of student success. The U.S. Department of Education gauges student commitment by the following criteria: "How much time do students devote to homework each night?" and "Do students come to class prepared and ready to learn? (Do they bring books and pencils? Have they completed their homework?)" According to surveys of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders, girls consistently do more homework than boys. By the twelfth grade boys are four times as likely as girls not to do homework. Similarly, more boys than girls report that they "usually" or "often" come to school without supplies or without having done their homework.

The performance gap between boys and girls in high school leads directly to the growing gap between male and female admissions to college. The Department of Education reports that in 1996 there were 8.4 million women but only 6.7 million men enrolled in college. It predicts that women will hold on to and increase their lead well into the next decade, and that by 2007 the numbers will be 9.2 million women and 6.9 million men.

Deconstructing the Test-Score Gap

FEMINISTS cannot deny that girls get better grades, are more engaged academically, and are now the majority sex in higher education. They argue, however, that these advantages are hardly decisive. Boys, they point out, get higher scores than girls on almost every significant standardized test -- especially the Scholastic Assessment Test and law school, medical school, and graduate school admissions tests.

In 1996 I wrote [an article for *Education Week*](#) about the many ways in which girl students were moving ahead of boys. Seizing on the test-score data that suggest boys are doing better than girls, David Sadker, a professor of education at American University and a co-author with his wife, Myra, of *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (1994), wrote, "If females are soaring in school, as Christina Hoff Sommers writes, then these tests are blind to their flight." On the 1998 SAT boys were thirty-five points (out of 800) ahead of girls in math and seven points ahead in English. These results seem to run counter to all other measurements of achievement in school. In almost all other areas boys lag behind girls. Why do they test better? Is Sadker right in suggesting that this is a manifestation of boys' privileged status?

The answer is no. A careful look at the pool of students who take the SAT and similar tests shows that the girls' lower scores have little or nothing to do with bias or unfairness. Indeed, the scores do not even signify lower achievement by girls. First of all, according to [College Bound Seniors](#), an annual report on standardized-test takers published by the College Board, many more "at risk" girls than "at risk" boys take the SAT -- girls from lower-income homes or with parents who never graduated from high school or never attended college. "These characteristics," the report says, "are associated with lower than average SAT scores." Instead of wrongly using SAT scores as evidence of bias against girls, scholars should be concerned about the boys who never show up for the tests they need if they are to move on to higher education.

Another factor skews test results so that they appear to favor boys. Nancy Cole, the president of the [Educational Testing Service](#), calls it the "spread" phenomenon. Scores on almost any intelligence or achievement test are more spread out for boys than for girls -- boys include more prodigies and more students of marginal ability. Or, as the political scientist James Q. Wilson once put it, "There are more male geniuses and more male idiots."

Boys also dominate dropout lists, failure lists, and learning-disability lists. Students in these groups rarely take college-admissions tests. On the other hand, the exceptional boys who take school seriously show up in disproportionately high numbers for standardized tests. Gender-equity activists like Sadker ought to apply their logic consistently: if the shortage of girls at the high end of the ability distribution is evidence of unfairness to girls, then the excess of boys at the low end should be deemed evidence of unfairness to boys.

Suppose we were to turn our attention away from the highly motivated, self-selected two fifths of high school students who take the SAT and consider instead a truly representative sample of American schoolchildren. How would girls and boys then compare? Well, we have the answer. [The National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), started in 1969 and mandated by Congress, offers the best and most comprehensive measure of achievement among students at all levels of ability. Under the NAEP program 70,000 to 100,000 students, drawn from forty-four states, are tested in reading, writing, math, and science at ages nine, thirteen, and seventeen. In 1996, seventeen-year-old boys outperformed seventeen-year-old girls by five points in math and eight points in science, whereas the girls outperformed the boys by fourteen points in reading and seventeen points in writing. In the past few years girls have been catching up in math and science while boys have continued to lag far behind in reading and writing.

In the July, 1995, issue of *Science*, Larry V. Hedges and Amy Nowell, researchers at the University of Chicago, observed that girls' deficits in math were small but not insignificant. These deficits, they noted, could adversely affect the number of women who "excel in scientific and technical occupations." Of the deficits in boys' writing skills they wrote, "The large sex differences in writing ... are alarming.... The data imply that males are, on average, at a rather profound disadvantage in the performance of this basic skill." They went on to warn,

The generally larger numbers of males who perform near the bottom of the distribution in reading comprehension and writing also have policy implications. It seems likely that individuals with such poor literacy skills will have difficulty finding employment in an increasingly information-driven economy. Thus, some intervention may be required to enable them to participate constructively.

Hedges and Nowell were describing a serious problem of national scope, but because the focus elsewhere has been on girls' deficits, few Americans know much about the problem or even suspect that it exists.

Indeed, so accepted has the myth of girls in crisis become that even teachers who work daily with male and female students tend to reflexively dismiss any challenge to the myth, or any evidence pointing to the very real crisis among boys. Three years ago Scarsdale High School, in New York, held a gender-equity workshop for faculty members. It was the standard girls-are-being-shortchanged fare, with one notable difference. A male student gave a presentation in which he pointed to evidence suggesting that girls at Scarsdale High were well ahead of boys. David Greene, a social-studies teacher, thought the student must be mistaken, but when he and some colleagues analyzed department grading patterns, they discovered that the student was right. They found little or no difference in the grades of boys and girls in advanced-placement social-studies classes. But in standard classes the girls were doing a lot better.

And Greene discovered one other thing: few wanted to hear about his startling findings. Like schools everywhere, Scarsdale High has been strongly influenced by the belief that girls are systematically deprived. That belief prevails among the school's gender-equity committee and has led the school to offer a special senior elective on gender equity. Greene has tried to broach the subject of male underperformance with his colleagues. Many of them concede that in the classes they teach, the girls seem to be doing better than the boys, but they do not see this as part of a larger pattern. After so many years of hearing about silenced, diminished girls, teachers do not take seriously the suggestion that boys are not doing as well as girls even if they see it with their own eyes in their own classrooms.

HOW did we get to this odd place? How did we come to believe in a picture of American boys and girls that is the opposite of the truth? And why has that belief persisted, enshrined in law, encoded in governmental and school policies, despite overwhelming evidence against it? The answer has much to do with one of the American academy's most celebrated women -- Carol Gilligan, Harvard University's first professor of gender studies.

Gilligan first came to widespread attention in 1982, with the publication of *In a Different Voice*, which this article will discuss shortly. In 1990 Gilligan announced that America's adolescent girls were in crisis. In her words, "As the river of a girl's life flows into the sea of Western culture, she is in danger of drowning or disappearing." Gilligan offered little in the way of conventional evidence to support this alarming finding. Indeed, it is hard to imagine what sort of empirical research could establish such a large claim. But she quickly attracted powerful allies. Within a very short time the allegedly vulnerable and demoralized state of adolescent girls achieved the status of a national emergency.

Popular writers, electrified by Gilligan's discovery, began to see evidence of the crisis everywhere. Anna Quindlen, who was then a *New York Times* columnist, recounted in a 1990 column how Gilligan's research had cast an ominous shadow on the celebration of her daughter's second birthday: "My daughter is ready to leap into the world, as though life were chicken soup and she a delighted noodle. The work of Professor Carol Gilligan of Harvard suggests that some time after the age of 11 this will change, that even this lively little girl will pull back [and] shrink."

A number of popular books soon materialized, including Myra and David Sadker's *Failing at Fairness* and Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (1994). Elizabeth Gleick wrote in *Time* in 1996 on a new trend in literary victimology: "Dozens of troubled teenage girls troop across [the] pages: composite sketches of Charlottes, Whitneys and Danielles who were raped, who have bulimia, who have pierced bodies or shaved heads, who are coping with strict religious families or are felled by their parents' bitter divorce."

The country's adolescent girls were both pitied and exalted. The novelist Carolyn See wrote in *The Washington Post* in 1994, "The most heroic, fearless, graceful, tortured human beings in this land must be girls from the ages of 12 to 15." In the same vein, the Sadkers, in *Failing at Fairness*, predicted the fate of a lively six-year-old on top of a playground slide: "There she stood on her sturdy legs, with her head thrown back and her arms flung wide. As ruler of the playground, she was at the very zenith of her world." But all would soon change: "If the camera had photographed the girl ... at twelve instead of six ... she would have been looking at the ground instead of the sky; her sense of self-worth would have been an accelerating downward spiral."

A picture of confused and forlorn girls struggling to survive would be drawn again and again, with added details and increasing urgency. Mary Pipher, a clinical psychologist, wrote in *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), by far the most successful of the girls-in-crisis books, "Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn."

The description of America's teenage girls as silenced, tortured, and otherwise personally diminished was (and is) indeed dismaying. But no real evidence has ever been offered to support it. Certainly neither Gilligan nor the popular writers who followed her lead produced anything like solid empirical evidence, gathered according to the conventional protocols of social-science research.

Scholars who do abide by those protocols describe adolescent girls in far more optimistic terms. Anne Petersen, a former professor of adolescent development and pediatrics at the University of Minnesota and now a senior vice-president of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, reports the consensus of researchers working in adolescent psychology: "It is now known that the majority of adolescents of both genders successfully negotiate this developmental period without any major psychological or emotional disorder, develop a positive sense of personal identity, and manage to forge adaptive peer relationships with their families." Daniel Offer, a professor of psychiatry at Northwestern, concurs. He refers to a "new generation of studies" that find 80 percent of adolescents to be normal and well adjusted.

At the time that Gilligan was declaring her crisis, a study conducted by the University of Michigan asked a scientifically selected sample of 3,000 high school seniors, "Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days -- would you say you're very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy these days?" Nearly 86 percent of the girls and 88 percent of the boys responded that they were "pretty happy" or "very happy." If the girls polled were caught in "an accelerating downward spiral," they were unaware of it.

Contrary to the story told by Gilligan and her followers, American girls were flourishing in unprecedented ways by the early 1990s. To be sure, some -- including many who found themselves in the offices of clinical psychologists -- felt they were crashing and drowning in the sea of Western culture. But the vast majority were occupied in more-constructive ways, moving ahead of boys in the primary and secondary grades, applying to college in record numbers, filling challenging academic classes, joining sports teams, and generally enjoying more freedom and opportunities than any other young women in history.

The great discrepancy between what Gilligan says she discovered about adolescent girls and what numerous other scientists say they have learned raises obvious questions about the quality of Gilligan's research. And these questions loom larger the more one examines Gilligan's methods. Carol Gilligan is a much-celebrated figure. Journalists routinely cite her research on the distinctive moral psychology of women. She was *Ms.* magazine's Woman of the Year in 1984, and *Time* put her on its short list of most-influential Americans in 1996. In 1997 she received the \$250,000 Heinz Award for "transform[ing] the paradigm for what it means to be human." Such a transformation would certainly be a feat. At the very least, it would require a great deal of empirical supporting evidence. Most of Gilligan's published research, however, consists of anecdotes based on a small number of interviews. Her data are otherwise unavailable for review, giving rise to some reasonable doubts about their merits and persuasiveness.

In a Different Voice offered the provocative thesis that men and women have distinctly different ways of dealing with moral quandaries. Relying on data from three studies she had conducted, Gilligan found that women tend to be more caring, less competitive, and less abstract than men; they speak "in a different voice." Women approach moral questions by applying an "ethic of care." In contrast, men approach moral issues by applying rules and abstract principles; theirs is an "ethic of justice." Gilligan argued further that women's moral style had been insufficiently studied by professional psychologists. She complained that the entire fields of psychology and moral philosophy had been built on studies that excluded women. *In a Different Voice* was an instant success. It sold more than 600,000 copies and was translated into nine languages. A reviewer at *Vogue* explained its appeal: "[Gilligan] flips old prejudices against women on their ears. She reframes qualities regarded as women's weaknesses and shows them to be human strengths. It is impossible to consider [her] ideas without having your estimation of women rise."

The book received a mixed reaction from feminists. Some -- such as the philosophers Virginia Held and Sara Ruddick, and those in various fields who would come to be known as "difference feminists" -- were tantalized by the idea that women were different from, and quite probably better than, men. But other academic feminists attacked Gilligan for reinforcing stereotypes about women as nurturers and caretakers.

Many academic psychologists, feminist and nonfeminist alike, found Gilligan's specific claims about distinct male and female moral orientations unpersuasive and ungrounded in empirical data. Lawrence Walker, of the University of British Columbia, has reviewed 108 studies of sex differences in solving moral problems. He concluded in a 1984 review article in *Child Development* that "sex differences in moral reasoning in late adolescence and youth are rare." In 1987 three psychologists at Oberlin College attempted to test Gilligan's hypothesis: they administered a moral-reasoning test to 101 male and female students and concluded, "There were no reliable sex differences ... in the directions predicted by Gilligan." Concurring with Walker, the Oberlin researchers pointed out that "Gilligan failed to provide acceptable empirical support for her model."

The thesis of *In a Different Voice* is based on three studies Gilligan conducted: the "college student study," the "abortion decision study," and the "rights and responsibilities study." Here is how Gilligan described the last.

This study involved a sample of males and females matched for age, intelligence, education, occupation, and social class at nine points across the life cycle: ages 6-9, 11, 15, 19, 22, 25-27, 35, 45, and 60. From a total sample of 144 (8 males and 8 females at each age), including a more intensively interviewed subsample of 36 (2 males and 2 females at each age), data were collected on conceptions of self and morality, experiences of moral conflicts and choice, and judgments of hypothetical moral dilemmas.

This description is all we ever learn about the mechanics of the study, which seems to have no proper name; it was never published, never peer-reviewed. It was, in any case, very small in scope and in number of subjects. And the data are tantalizingly inaccessible. In September of 1998 my research assistant, Elizabeth Bowen, called Gilligan's office and asked where she could find copies of the three studies that were the basis for *In a Different Voice*. Gilligan's assistant, Tatiana Bertsch, told her that they were unavailable, and not in the public domain; because of the sensitivity of the data (especially the abortion study), the information had been kept confidential. Asked where the studies were now kept, Bertsch explained that the original data were being prepared to be placed in a Harvard library: "They are physically in the office. We are in the process of sending them to the archives at the Murray Center."

In October of 1998 Hugh Liebert, a sophomore at Harvard who had been my research assistant the previous summer, spoke to Bertsch. She told him that the data would not be available until the end of the academic year, adding, "They have been kept secret because the issues [raised in the study] are so sensitive." She suggested that he check back occasionally. He tried again in March. This time she informed him, "They will not be available anytime soon." Last September, Liebert tried one more time. He sent an e-mail message directly to Gilligan, but Bertsch sent back the reply.

None of the *In a Different Voice* studies have been published. We are in the process of donating the college student study to the [Murray Research Center at Radcliffe](#), but that will not be completed for another year, probably. At this point Professor Gilligan has no immediate plans of donating the abortion or the rights and responsibilities studies. Sorry that none of what you are interested in is available.

Brendan Maher is a professor emeritus at Harvard University and a former chairman of the psychology department. I told him about the inaccessibility of Gilligan's data and the explanation that their sensitive nature precluded public dissemination. He laughed and said, "It would be extraordinary to say [that one's data] are too sensitive for others to see." He pointed out that there are standard methods for handling confidential materials in research. Names are left out but raw scores are reported, "so others can see if they can replicate your study." A researcher must also disclose how subjects were chosen, how interviews were recorded, and the method by which meaning was derived from the data.

"Politics Dressed Up as Science"

GILLIGAN'S ideas about demoralized teenage girls had a special resonance with women's groups that were already committed to the proposition that our society is unsympathetic to women. The interest of the venerable and politically influential American Association of University Women, in particular, was piqued. Its officers were reported to be "intrigued and alarmed" by Gilligan's research. They wanted to know more.



In 1990 *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* published an admiring profile of Gilligan that heralded the discovery of a hidden crisis among the nation's girls. Soon after, the AAUW commissioned a study from the polling firm Greenberg-Lake. The pollsters asked 3,000 children (2,400 girls and 600 boys in grades four through ten) about their self-perceptions. In 1991 the association announced the disturbing results, in a report titled *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*: "Girls aged eight and nine are confident, assertive, and feel authoritative about themselves. Yet most emerge from adolescence with a poor self-image, constrained views of their future and their place in society, and much less confidence about themselves and their abilities." Anne Bryant, the executive director of the AAUW and an expert in public relations, organized a media campaign to spread the word that "an unacknowledged American tragedy" had been uncovered. Newspapers and magazines around the country carried reports that girls were being adversely affected by gender bias that eroded their self-esteem. Sharon Schuster, at the time the president of the AAUW, candidly explained to *The New York Times* why the association had undertaken the research in the first place: "We wanted to put some factual data behind our belief that girls are getting shortchanged in the classroom."

As the AAUW's self-esteem study was making headlines, a little-known magazine called *Science News*, which has been supplying information on scientific and technical developments to interested newspapers since 1922, reported the skeptical reaction of leading specialists on adolescent development. The late Roberta Simmons, a professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh (described by *Science News* as "director of the most ambitious longitudinal study of adolescent self-esteem to date"), said that her research showed nothing like the substantial gender gap described by the AAUW. According to Simmons, "Most kids come through the years from 10 to 20 without major problems and with an increasing sense of self-esteem." But the doubts of Simmons and several other prominent experts were not reported in the hundreds of news stories that the Greenberg-Lake study generated.

The AAUW quickly commissioned a second study, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*. This one, conducted by the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women and released in 1992, focused on the alleged effects of sexism on girls' school performance. It asserted that schools deflate girls' self-esteem by "systematically cheating girls of classroom attention." Such bias leads to lower aspirations and impaired academic achievement. Carol Gilligan's crisis was being transformed into a civil-rights issue: girls were the victims of widespread sex discrimination. "The implications are clear," the AAUW said. "The system must change."

With great fanfare *How Schools Shortchange Girls* was released to the remarkably uncritical media. A 1992 article for *The New York Times* by Susan Chira was typical of coverage throughout the country. The headline read "Bias Against Girls is Found Rife in Schools, With Lasting Damage." The piece was later reproduced by the AAUW and sent out as part of a fundraising package. Chira had not interviewed a single critic of the study.

In March of last year I called Chira and asked about the way she had handled the AAUW study. I asked if she would write her article the same way today. No, she said, pointing out that we have since learned much more about boys' problems in school. Why had she not canvassed dissenting opinions? She explained that she had been traveling when the AAUW study came out, and was on a short deadline. Yes, perhaps she had relied too much on the AAUW's report. She had tried to reach Diane Ravitch, who had then been the former U.S. assistant secretary of education and was a known critic of women's-advocacy findings, but without success.

Six years after the release of *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, *The New York Times* ran a story that raised questions about its validity. This time the reporter, Tamar Lewin, did reach Diane Ravitch, who told her, "That [1992] AAUW report was just completely wrong. What was so bizarre is that it came out right at the time that girls had just overtaken boys in almost every area. It might have been the right story twenty years earlier, but coming out when it did, it was like calling a wedding a funeral.... There were all these special programs put in place for girls, and no one paid any attention to boys."

One of the many things about which the report was wrong was the famous "call-out" gap. According to the AAUW, "In a study conducted by the Sadkers, boys in elementary and middle school called out answers eight times more often than girls. When boys called out, teachers listened. But when girls called out, they were told 'raise your hand if you want to speak.'"

But the Sadker study turns out to be missing -- and meaningless, to boot. In 1994 Amy Saltzman, of *U.S. News & World Report*, asked David Sadker for a copy of the research backing up the eight-to-one call-out claim. Sadker said that he had presented the findings in an unpublished paper at a symposium sponsored by the American Educational Research Association; neither he nor the AERA had a copy. Sadker conceded to Saltzman that the ratio may have been inaccurate. Indeed, Saltzman cited an independent study by Gail Jones, an associate professor of education at the University of North Carolina, at Chapel Hill, which found that boys called out only twice as often as girls. Whatever the accurate number is, no one has shown that permitting a student to call out answers in the classroom confers any kind of academic advantage. What does confer advantage is a student's attentiveness. Boys are less attentive -- which could explain why some teachers might call on them more or be more tolerant of call-outs.

Despite the errors, the campaign to persuade the public that girls were being diminished personally and academically was a spectacular success. The Sadkers described an exultant Anne Bryant, of the AAUW, telling her friends, "I remember going to bed the night our report was issued, totally exhilarated. When I woke up the next morning, the first thought in my mind was, 'Oh, my God, what do we do next?'" Political action came next, and here, too, girls' advocates were successful.

Categorizing girls as an "under-served population" on a par with other discriminated-against minorities, Congress passed the Gender Equity in Education Act in 1994. Millions of dollars in grants were awarded to study the plight of girls and to learn how to counter bias against them. At the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing in 1995, members of the U.S. delegation presented the educational and psychological deficits of American girls as a human-rights issue.

The Myth Unraveling

BY the late 1990s the myth of the downtrodden girl was showing some signs of unraveling, and concern over boys was growing. In 1997 the [Public Education Network](#) (PEN) announced at its annual conference the results of a new teacher-student survey titled *The American Teacher 1997: Examining Gender Issues in Public Schools*. The survey was funded by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and conducted by Louis Harris and Associates.

During a three-month period in 1997 various questions about gender equity were asked of 1,306 students and 1,035 teachers in grades seven through twelve. The MetLife study had no doctrinal ax to grind. What it found contradicted most of the findings of the AAUW, the Sadkers, and the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women: "Contrary to the commonly held view that boys are at an advantage over girls in school, girls appear to have an advantage over boys in terms of their future plans, teachers' expectations, everyday experiences at school and interactions in the classroom."

Some other conclusions from the MetLife study: Girls are more likely than boys to see themselves as college-bound and more likely to want a good education. Furthermore, more boys (31 percent) than girls (19 percent) feel that teachers do not listen to what they have to say.

At the PEN conference, Nancy Leffert, a child psychologist then at the [Search Institute](#), in Minneapolis, reported the results of a survey that she and colleagues had recently completed of more than 99,000 children in grades six through twelve. The children were asked about what the researchers call "developmental assets." The Search Institute has identified forty critical assets -- "building blocks for healthy development." Half of these are external, such as a supportive family and adult role models, and half are internal, such as motivation to achieve, a sense of purpose in life, and interpersonal confidence. Leffert explained, somewhat apologetically, that girls were ahead of boys with respect to thirty-seven out of forty assets. By almost every significant measure of well-being girls had the better of boys: they felt closer to their families; they had higher aspirations, stronger connections to school, and even superior assertiveness skills. Leffert concluded her talk by saying that in the past she had referred to girls as fragile or vulnerable, but that the survey "tells me that girls have very powerful assets."

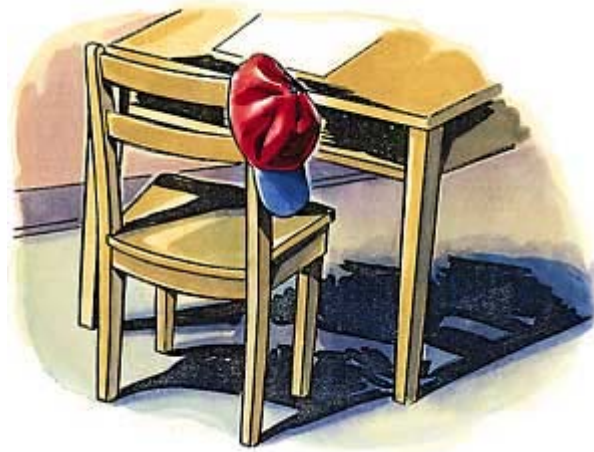
[The Horatio Alger Association](#), a fifty-year-old organization devoted to promoting and affirming individual initiative and "the American dream," releases annual back-to-school surveys. Its survey for 1998 contrasted two groups of students: the "highly successful" (approximately 18 percent of American students) and the "disillusioned" (approximately 15 percent). The successful students work hard, choose challenging classes, make schoolwork a top priority, get good grades, participate in extracurricular activities, and feel that teachers and administrators care about them and listen to them. According to the association, the successful group in the 1998 survey is 63 percent female and 37 percent male. The disillusioned students are pessimistic about their future, get low grades, and have little contact with teachers. The disillusioned group could accurately be characterized as demoralized. According to the Alger Association, "Nearly seven out of ten are male."

In the spring of 1998 Judith Kleinfeld, a psychologist at the University of Alaska, published a thorough critique of the research on schoolgirls titled "[The Myth That Schools Shortchange Girls: Social Science in the Service of Deception.](#)" Kleinfeld exposed a number of errors in the AAUW/Wellesley Center study, concluding that it was "politics dressed up as science." Kleinfeld's report prompted several publications, including *The New York Times* and *Education Week*, to take a second look at claims that girls were in a tragic state.

The AAUW did not adequately respond to any of Kleinfeld's substantive objections; instead its current president, Maggie Ford, complained in the *New York Times* letters column that Kleinfeld was "reducing the problems of our children to this petty 'who is worse off, boys or girls?' [which] gets us nowhere." From the leader of an organization that spent nearly a decade ceaselessly promoting the proposition that American girls are being "shortchanged," this comment is rather remarkable.

Boys and Their Mothers

GROWING evidence that the scales are tipped not against girls but against boys is beginning to inspire a quiet revisionism. Some educators will admit that boys are on the wrong side of the gender gap. In 1998 I met the president of the Board of Education of Atlanta. Who is faring better in Atlanta's schools, boys or girls? I asked. "Girls," he replied, without hesitation. In what areas? I asked. "Just about any area you mention." A high school principal from Pennsylvania says of his school, "Students who dominate the dropout list, the suspension list, the failure list, and other negative indices of nonachievement in school are males by a wide margin."



Carol Gilligan, too, has begun to give boys some attention. In 1995 she and her colleagues at the Harvard University School of Education inaugurated "The Harvard Project on Women's Psychology, Boys' Development and the Culture of Manhood." Within a year Gilligan was announcing the existence of a crisis among boys that was as bad as or worse than the one afflicting girls. "Girls' psychological development in patriarchy involves a process of eclipse that is even more total for boys," she wrote in a 1996 article titled "The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development."

Gilligan claimed to have discovered "a startling pattern of developmental asymmetry": girls undergo trauma as they enter adolescence, whereas for boys the period of crisis is early childhood. Boys aged three to seven are pressured to "take into themselves the structure or moral order of a patriarchal civilization: to internalize a patriarchal voice." This masculinizing process is traumatic and damaging. "At this age," Gilligan told *The Boston Globe* in 1996, "boys show a high incidence of depression, out-of-control behavior, learning disorders, even allergies and stuttering."

One can welcome Gilligan's acceptance of the fact that boys, too, have problems while remaining deeply skeptical of her ideas about their source. Gilligan's theory about boys' development includes three hypothetical claims: 1) Boys are being deformed and made sick by a traumatic, forced separation from their mothers. 2) Seemingly healthy boys are cut off from their own feelings and damaged in their capacity to develop healthy relationships. 3) The well-being of society may depend on freeing boys from "cultures that value or valorize heroism, honor, war, and competition -- the culture of warriors, the economy of capitalism." Let us consider each proposition in turn.

According to Gilligan, boys are at special risk in early childhood; they suffer "more stuttering, more bedwetting, more learning problems ... when cultural norms pressure them to separate from their mothers." (Sometimes she adds allergies, attention-deficit disorder, and attempted suicide to the list.) She does not cite any pediatric research to support her theory about the origins of these various early-childhood disorders. Does a study exist, for example, showing that boys who remain intimately bonded with their mothers are less likely to develop allergies or wet their beds?

Gilligan's assertion that the "pressure of cultural norms" causes boys to separate from their mothers and thus generates a host of early disorders has not been tested empirically. Nor does Gilligan offer any indication of how it *could* be tested. She does not seem to feel that her assertions need empirical confirmation. She is confident that boys need to be protected from the culture -- a culture in which manhood valorizes war and the economy of capitalism, a culture that desensitizes boys and, by submerging their humanity, is the root cause of "out-of-control and out-of-touch behavior" and is the ultimate source of war and other violence committed by men.

But are boys aggressive and violent because they are psychically separated from their mothers? Thirty years of research suggests that the absence of the male parent is more likely to be the problem. The boys who are most at risk for juvenile delinquency and violence are boys who are *physically* separated from their fathers. The U.S. Bureau of the Census reports that in 1960 children living with their mother but not their father numbered 5.1 million; by 1996 the number was more than 16 million. As the phenomenon of fatherlessness has increased, so has violence. As far back as 1965 Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan called attention to the social dangers of raising boys without benefit of a paternal presence. He wrote in a 1965 study for the Labor Department, "A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any rational expectations about the future -- that community asks for and gets chaos."

The sociologist David Blankenhorn, in *Fatherless America* (1995), wrote, "Despite the difficulty of proving causation in the social sciences, the weight of evidence increasingly supports the conclusion that fatherlessness is a primary generator of violence among young men." William Galston, a former domestic-policy adviser in the Clinton Administration who is now at the University of Maryland, and his colleague Elaine Kamarck, now at Harvard, concur. Commenting on the relationship between crime and one-parent families, they wrote in a 1990 institute report, "The relationship is so strong that controlling for family configuration erases the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime. This conclusion shows up time and again in the literature."

Oblivious of all the factual evidence that paternal separation causes aberrant behavior in boys, Carol Gilligan calls for a fundamental change in child rearing that would keep boys in a more sensitive relationship with their feminine side. We need to free young men from a destructive culture of manhood that "impedes their capacity to feel their own and other people's hurt, to know their own and other's sadness," she writes. Since the pathology, as she has diagnosed it, is presumably universal, the cure must be radical. We must change the very nature of childhood: we must find ways to keep boys bonded to their mothers. We must undercut the system of socialization that is so "essential to the perpetuation of patriarchal societies."

Gilligan's views are attractive to many of those who believe that boys could profit by being more sensitive and empathetic. But anyone thinking to enlist in Gilligan's project of getting boys in touch with their inner nurturer would do well to note that her central thesis -- that boys are being imprisoned by conventional ideas of masculinity -- is not a scientific hypothesis. Nor, it seems, does Gilligan regard it in this light, for she presents no data to support it. It is, in fact, an extravagant piece of speculation of the kind that would not be taken seriously in most professional departments of psychology.

On a less academic plane Gilligan's proposed reformation seems to challenge common sense. It is obvious that a boy wants his father to help him become a young man, and belonging to the culture of manhood is important to almost every boy. To impugn his desire to become "one of the boys" is to deny that a boy's biology determines much of what he prefers and is attracted to. Unfortunately, by denying the nature of boys, education theorists can cause them much misery.

Gilligan talks of radically reforming "the fundamental structure of authority" by making changes that will free boys from the stereotypes that bind them. But in what sense are American boys unfree? Was the young Mark Twain or the young Teddy Roosevelt enslaved by conventional modes of boyhood? Is the average Little Leaguer or Cub Scout defective in the ways Gilligan suggests? In practice, getting boys to be more like girls means getting them to stop segregating themselves into all-male groups. That's the darker, coercive side of the project to "free" boys from their masculine straitjackets.

It is certainly true that a small subset of male children are, as Gilligan argues, desensitized and cut off from feelings of tenderness and care. But these boys are not representative of their sex. Gilligan speaks of boys in general as "hiding their humanity," showing a capacity to "hurt without feeling hurt." This, she maintains, is a more or less universal condition that exists because the vast majority of boys are forced into separation from their nurturers. But the idea that boys are abnormally insensitive flies in the face of everyday experience. Boys are competitive and often aggressive, yes; but anyone in close contact with them -- parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, friends -- gets daily proof of their humanity, loyalty, and compassion.

Gilligan appears to be making the same mistake with boys that she made with girls -- she observes a few children and interprets their problems as indicative of a deep and general malaise caused by the way our society imposes gender stereotypes. The pressure to conform to these stereotypes, she believes, has impaired, distressed, and deformed the members of both sexes by the time they are adolescents. In fact -- with the important exception of boys whose fathers are absent and who get their concept of maleness from peer groups -- most boys are not violent. Most are not unfeeling or antisocial. They are just boys -- and being a boy is not in itself a failing.

Does Gilligan actually understand boys? Does she empathize with them? Is she free of the misandry that infects so many gender theorists who never stop blaming the "male culture" for all social and psychological ills? Nothing we have seen or heard offers the slightest reassurance that Gilligan and her followers are wise enough or objective enough to be trusted with devising new ways of socializing boys.

Every society confronts the problem of civilizing its young males. The traditional approach is through character education: Develop the young man's sense of honor. Help him become a considerate, conscientious human being. Turn him into a gentleman. This approach respects boys' masculine nature; it is time-tested, and it works. Even today, despite several decades of moral confusion, most young men understand the term "gentleman" and approve of the ideals it connotes.

What Gilligan and her followers are proposing is quite different: civilize boys by diminishing their masculinity. "Raise boys like we raise girls" is Gloria Steinem's advice. This approach is deeply disrespectful of boys. It is meddling, abusive, and quite beyond what educators in a free society are mandated to do.

DID anything of value come out of the manufactured crisis of diminished girls? Yes, a bit. Parents, teachers, and administrators now pay more attention to girls' deficits in math and science, and they offer more support for girls' participation in sports. But who is to say that these benefits outweigh the disservice done by promulgating the myth of the incredible shrinking girl or presenting boys as the unfairly favored sex?

A boy today, through no fault of his own, finds himself implicated in the social crime of shortchanging girls. Yet the allegedly silenced and neglected girl sitting next to him is likely to be the superior student. She is probably more articulate, more mature, more engaged, and more well-balanced. The boy may be aware that she is more likely to go on to college. He may believe that teachers prefer to be around girls and pay more attention to them. At the same time, he is uncomfortably aware that he is considered to be a member of the favored and dominant gender.

The widening gender gap in academic achievement is real. It threatens the future of millions of American boys. Boys do not need to be rescued from their masculinity. But they are not getting the help they need. In the climate of disapproval in which boys now exist, programs designed to aid them have a very low priority. This must change. We should repudiate the partisanship that currently clouds the issues surrounding sex differences in the schools. We should call for balance, objective information, fair treatment, and a concerted national effort to get boys back on track. That means we can no longer allow the partisans of girls to write the rules.