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# The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men

*Christina Hoff Sommers*

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There is a surprising amount of hostility toward boys in this country. To put it bluntly: boys are politically incorrect. We may in fact be on the way to becoming perhaps the first society in history to turn against its male children. In my new book I try to show how this is happening and why it is happening.

Let me begin by telling you a brief story about something that happened two years ago during a television debate I had with Gloria Allred, a celebrity lawyer from California.

Allred was representing a fourteen-year-old girl who was suing the Boy Scouts of America for excluding girls. Girls fifteen and older can join the Explorer Scouts, which is coed, but Allred was outraged that girls younger than fifteen are not allowed in. She referred to same-sex scouting as a form of gender discrimination—she called it “gender apartheid.”

I defended the Boy Scouts. I told her that younger boys and girls have different preferences and behaviors, citing the following homespun exam-

ple. Hasbro Toys, a major toy manufacturing company, tested a playhouse the company was considering marketing to both boys and girls. But it soon emerged that girls and boys did not interact with the structure in the same way. The girls dressed the dolls, kissed them, and played house; the boys catapulted the toy baby carriage from the roof. A Hasbro general manager came up with an explanation: boys and girls are different.

Allred flatly denied that there are any innate differences. She seemed shocked by the boys' behavior. Apparently, she took it as a sign of potential violence. She said, "If there are some boys who catapult baby carriages off the roofs of doll houses, perhaps that is just an argument why we need to socialize boys at an earlier age to be playing with dolls."

Allred has powerful allies among educators. Gloria Steinem, a famous feminist leader, once said, "We need to raise boys more like we raise girls." Many schools are now following her advice. Not because they don't like boys—not because they want to harm males—but because they sincerely believe that something is seriously wrong with young men in America. A growing number of experts now claim that the nation's boys, as a group, are disturbed: depressed, not in touch with their feelings, and, for that reason, prone to violence. According to these critics, their masculinity—their idea of what it is to be male—is making them miserable and dangerous. Two psychologists at Harvard University, Carol Gilligan and William Pollack, have

declared a national boy crisis. At the same time, hard-line feminists are persuaded that unless we intervene at the earliest possible age to change boys, women and girls will continue to be "oppressed under patriarchy." So there is a growing movement to save the males—by making them less masculine.

### ***Saving the Males***

Do American boys need to be saved? Do they need to be rescued from their masculinity? I do not think so. I do not agree that the nation's boys are in crisis. I see no evidence for it. Some boys, of course, are in serious trouble. So too are some girls. A small percentage of boys are antisocial and violent. But when you look at genuine social science research, you find that a vast majority of boys are mentally healthy. Being a boy is not a defect. It is not a disorder. It is not something you need to recover from.

The best way to explain the save-the-males movement is to describe some of the programs advocated by its founding members. Some of what I'm about to describe may sound extreme. It is. But what worries me is that if no one stands up and protests it, it could easily become mainstream. Take, for instance, the proposal by the Ms. Foundation for Women to create a national holiday for boys called Son's Day. The Ms. Foundation, of course, created the school holiday for girls called Take Our Daughters to Work Day. But to their consternation, many companies changed the day to Take Your Child to Work Day so as not to exclude boys. So the Ms. Foundation came up with the

idea to design a separate holiday for boys called Son's Day. Sounds great, right? Wrong. Here are some ways Son's Day was to be celebrated:

- Take your son for the day to an event that focuses on ending men's violence against women. Call 1-800 END ABUSE for more information.
- Plan a game or sport in which the contest does not keep score or declare a winner.
- Since Son's Day is on Sunday, get your son involved in preparing the family for the work and school week ahead by helping lay out clothes for siblings and making lunches.

And for boys not totally exhausted by all the fun and excitement of the day's activities, the Ms. planners had a suggestion for the evening: Take your son grocery shopping, then help him plan and prepare the family's evening meal. As the Ms. staff had planned it, Son's Day wouldn't even give boys a day off from school. One friend of mine called it "a holiday in hell for Junior." In the end, Son's Day was canceled and the Ms. Foundation is now back to the drawing board trying to come up with a new plan to protect Take Our Daughters to Work Day. Nevertheless, their attempt to initiate a boys' holiday tells us something about how these reformers see boys: as undomesticated, too competitive, and in serious need of reeducation.

### ***Quit It!***

Another example of the save-the-males movement is a new anti-sexual

harassment guide called "Quit It!" funded by the U.S. Department of Education and distributed by the National Education Association. Written by several women's groups, "Quit It!" is directed at the supposedly sexually harassing behavior of small children, especially boys in kindergarten through third grade.

In the preface the authors explain that boys need special training, not necessarily because they are "bad" but because "we must all do a better job of addressing the aggressive behavior of young boys." So "Quit It!" introduces teachers to activities designed to calm boys down and make them less volatile. One such recommended activity is a new, nonviolent, nonthreatening version of the game of tag. Here is what the guide advises teachers to do: "Before going outside to play, talk about how students feel when playing a game of tag. Do they like to be chased? Do they like to do the chasing? How does it feel to be tagged out? Get their ideas about other ways the game might be played."

After students share their fears and apprehensions about tag, the teacher is advised to announce that there is a new, nonthreatening version of the game called Circle of Friends "where nobody is ever 'out.'"

Perhaps some of the students experienced anger during playtime. The guide provides the teacher with the tools for organizing an in-class anger management workshop with the children. Reading it, you have to remind yourself that its suggestions are intended not for disturbed children but for

normal five- to seven-year-olds.

Here is how the *Boston Globe* describes one gender-fair school in Lexington, Massachusetts:

Four years after it created its gender equity committee, Fiske Elementary is rife with signs of raised gender awareness. A quilt of famous women, sewn by fifth-grade boys and girls, is displayed in the front hall. A wood sign on principal Joanne Benton's door declares this to be the "Princessipal's Office." Benton proudly maintains that "we have no single-sex table in our lunch room, and at recess, boys and girls play kickball together."

In more and more schools, boys are out of favor. Carol Kennedy, a longtime teacher and now principal of a school in Missouri, complacently told the *Washington Post*, "We do take away a lot of the opportunity to do things boys like to do. That is, get rowdy and jump around. We don't allow that." Recess—the one time during the school day that boys can legitimately engage in rowdy play—is now under siege and may soon be a thing of the past. In an extreme situation, four kindergarten boys in Sayreville, New Jersey, were suspended for three days for using their fingers as guns in a game of cops and robbers.

Why is all this happening now? Why would a leading women's group come up with a holiday for boys that involves calling 1-800 END ABUSE for suggested activities? Why is the Department of Education funding programs like Quit It that treat young boys like fragile mental patients? As I said, there is deep concern that something is

wrong with boys. But what is it exactly? What is the problem with boys that justifies these extreme solutions?

### ***Violence: False Statistics***

The save-the-males reformers point to the high level of violence in American society. Most of it is perpetrated by males, and a lot of it is directed against women. What the reformers say they are trying to do is to attack the problem at its root, to reach boys at the earliest possible age and redirect them away from aggression and violence and toward nurture and compassion. And they come armed with some alarming statistics that makes their cause seem justified.

For example, Congress has created and the federal Department of Education supports an organization called the Women's Educational Equity Act Resource Center, WEEA for short. On the WEEA Web site—a government-supported Web site, mind you—there are some shocking statistics about male violence in American society. According to WEEA, violence is the leading cause of death for women, and every year nearly 4 million women are beaten to death.

According to WEEA director Katherine Hanson, these statistics are proof that males in our society are brought up to be aggressive, powerful, unemotional, and controlling. By her reckoning, the solutions proposed by programs like Quit It and Son's Day to change the violent natures of boys make sense.

There is just one problem. The statistics on this government-subsidized

Web site are wildly false. They are, in fact, the most egregiously false statistics I think I have ever encountered. Let's consider them in order of their shock value.

First, the claim that 4 million American women are beaten to death each year by men.

Think about it. If the WEEA numbers are right, the United States is experiencing a level of carnage unparalleled in our century. Four million women beaten to death by men! Every year! That's 11,000 women a day!

In fact, the total annual number of female deaths in the entire country from all causes combined is approximately 1 million. Only a minuscule fraction of these deaths is caused by violence and an even tinier fraction is caused by battery. According to the FBI, the number of women who were murdered in 1996 was 3,631.

The assertion that violence is the leading cause of death for women is equally false. For the record, the leading cause of death for women is heart disease, followed by cancer. But you wouldn't know it from visiting the WEEA Web site.

Hanson is deeply confused. There are women like her inside the Department of Education, in all the major women's advocacy groups, at the Wellesley Center. Armed with egregiously false information, they believe passionately in the need to resocialize boys. Hanson has suggested that one of the places to begin is Little League, which, says Hanson, "encourages aggressive, violent behavior."

## **Barbarian Invasion**

The movement to save the males is predicated on what can be called a "women are from Venus, men are from hell" philosophy. This is the philosophy behind attacks on Little League and games like Quit It. It informs the thought of the princessipal in Lexington, Massachusetts, and administrators in New Jersey who suspended the kindergartners. It is the philosophy behind Son's Day.

It is absolutely true that males commit most violent crimes—at least 90 percent—but it is also true that the vast majority of males are not violent. In fact, according to the FBI, in any given year fewer than 1 percent of boys under eighteen are arrested for violent crimes.

I am not saying that boys need no improvement. All children need to be brought up with clear, distinct rules. Little boys, even more than little girls, need structure and clear lines of authority. Boys who are ethically neglected have some very unpleasant ways of getting themselves noticed. It's not that girls are more moral than boys—they are not. Girls can be just as cruel and malicious as boys, if not more so. But cross-cultural studies have confirmed the obvious: boys are more physically aggressive.

In a classic 1973 study of male-female difference, Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin conclude that, compared to girls, boys engage in more mock fighting and more aggressive fantasies. They insult and hit one another

and retaliate more quickly when they're attacked.

These sex differences are found in very young children, as soon as social play begins. A 1997 University of Vermont study compared parents' reports of children's behavior in twelve countries. Parents in the United States, Thailand, Greece, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Sweden reported that in every case, boys were more likely than girls to fight, swear, steal, throw tantrums, and threaten others.

Gloria Allred, Gloria Steinem, the authors of *Son's Day*, and many experts at Harvard and the Department of Education see these hitting, chasing, fighting, swearing, competitive creatures as future criminals. I just see boys.

I think it was the social theorist Hannah Arendt who said that every year civilization is invaded by millions of tiny barbarians—they're called children. All societies confront the problem of civilizing their children, particularly their young males. History teaches that masculinity constrained by morality is powerful and constructive; it also teaches that masculinity without morality is terribly destructive.

We have a set of proven social practices for raising young men. The traditional approach is through character education: to develop a young man's sense of honor and help him become a considerate, conscientious human being. In short, to turn him into a gentleman. This approach respects boys' masculine natures. It is time-tested, and it works. Even today, despite several decades of moral confusion, most young men understand the term *gentle-*

*man* and approve of the ideals it connotes.

What the save-the-males reformers are proposing is quite different. They seek to civilize boys by rescuing them from their masculinity. "Raise boys more like we raise girls" is Gloria Steinem's advice. This approach is deeply disrespectful of boys.

### ***Feminists' Sons***

I have been critical of some feminists, but I'd like to end on an optimistic note. The subtitle of my book is *How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*. But there is a more generous and accepting kind of feminism that I strongly believe in. A feminism that asserts equality between men and women but accepts differences between them. A feminism that calls for fairness and understanding for both males and females.

When I first saw a recent book called *Between Mothers and Sons*, a collection of stories by feminist writers about what it is like to have a son, I thought it would be full of stories of mothers trying to save their sons from the violence and militaristic hegemony of the patriarchy. I expected to feel sorry for the boys. But the book surprised me. It turned out to be full of stories of women rediscovering the nature of boys, accepting it, and ultimately delighting in it.

Deborah Galyan, a short story writer and essayist, describes what happened when she sent her son Dylan to a Montessori preschool "run by a goddess-worshipping, multicultural women's collective on Cape Cod": "Something

about it did not honor his boy soul. I think it was the absence of physical competition. Boys who clashed or tussled with each other were separated and counseled by the peacemakers. Sticks were confiscated and turned into tomato stakes in the school garden.”

After agonizing over how she, a good feminist and pacifist, could be the mother of a stick-wielding, weapon-generating boy, Galyan comes upon the answer. She writes: “A five-year-old boy, I learned from reading summaries of various neurological studies, is a beautiful, fierce, testosterone drenched, cerebrally asymmetrical humanoid carefully engineered to move objects through space, or, at the very least, to watch others do so.”

Janet Burroway, a poet, novelist, and self-described pacifist-liberal, has a son, Tim, who grew up to become a career soldier. She is not sure how he came to move in a direction opposite her own. She recalls his abiding fascination with plastic planes, toy soldiers, and military history, noting that “his direction was early set.” Tim takes her aback in many ways, but she is clearly proud of him. Throughout his childhood she was struck by his “chivalric character.” “He would,” she writes, “literally lay down his life for a cause or a friend. I am forced to be aware of my own contradictions in his presence: a feminist often charmed by his machismo.”

Galyan and Burroway discard some common anti-male prejudices when they discover that boys have their own distinctive graces and virtues. The love and respect they share with their sons leads them to overcome the fashion-

able resentments that many females harbor toward males. My suggestion is that as a society we follow the example of these feminist mothers and rediscover the goodness of boys. We need to stop treating the Dylans and Tims and Boy Scouts and Little Leaguers of the world as if they are afflicted with a disorder called boyness.

It is unfashionable to say so, but I will say it anyway: the energy, adventurousness, stoicism, and competitiveness of normal, decent males are responsible for much of what is right in the world. All ages have understood this. All healthy societies appreciate and prize their young men. Why, in this day and age, should we be turning against them?

If you are an optimist, as I am, you believe that good sense and fair play will prevail. If you are a mother of sons, as I am, you know that one of the more agreeable facts of life is that boys will be boys.

***After her talk, Dr. Sommers took questions from her American Experiment audience.***

**Steve Blake:** R-Kids of Minnesota is having a rally this afternoon. One of the things we are protesting against is the ease with which women usually can obtain orders for protection and restraining orders against their husbands or boyfriends, thereby removing them from the home and also from their children’s lives.

**Christina Hoff Sommers:** The federal Violence Against Women Act

provides something like \$1.5 billion to combat a very serious problem, but there are problems with this bill. A lot of the money goes to hard-line feminist groups who promote the “women are from Venus, men are from hell” point of view.

I believe it was in Minnesota that some faith-based organizations wanted funding to approach the problem of family violence through “pastoral counseling.” They were denied funding. Yet the radical women’s groups were funded. That makes no sense.

The current climate is very hostile to men—although, surprisingly, the new laws are putting a lot of women behind bars. Many police departments are now required to arrest perpetrators when there is any violence in the home. Feminists assumed that droves of men would be arrested, but it turns out that a variety of family members are physically violent—especially siblings and mothers and daughters. Family violence is a genuine problem, but divisive gender politics won’t solve it.

**Jonathan Fuglestad:** Would you comment on the overdiagnosis of attention deficit disorder in young boys and putting them on medication?

**Christina Hoff Sommers:** That could be a whole speech in itself—the pathologizing of little boys, let’s put it that way. Some people believe that we are medicating males for their natural obstreperousness. What I found in talking to people on both sides of the controversy is that a significant percentage of kids—mostly boys, by the way—are diagnosed with attention deficit disorder,

hyperactivity disorder, and given Ritalin to calm them down. It’s an epidemic. We’re talking about millions of kids—I’ve heard statistics ranging from 2 million to 4 million kids, 75 percent boys—on this drug. In some school districts, as many as 15 to 20 percent of the boys are medicated. Everyone—even those who strongly believe in the therapy—agrees that Ritalin is overprescribed.

As we move against boys in this society, there is less tolerance for their antics. An example is the four little New Jersey boys who were suspended for playing cops and robbers. Kindergartners are running and jumping, and we’re treating that as a conduct disorder. The characteristic play of little boys is called rough-and-tumble play. This is true universally. Male children, and even male adults, enjoy rough-and-tumble play: mock fighting, fleeing, sound effects. Women have never totally understood it or approved of it, especially in the house.

Experts on child play—Anthony Pellegrini of the University of Minnesota, for example—will tell you that this is the natural and developmentally healthy play of little boys. The sad thing is that as a society, we’re failing to make the distinction between rough-and-tumble play and aggression.

Kids who are being violent and aggressive are usually frowning; they part as enemies. A violent, aggressive boy is not popular. Rough-and-tumblers laugh and scream with joy; you can see it on their faces. There’s nothing happier than a group of boys playing a raucous, high-spirited, competitive game.

If we had organizations that were looking out for boys, we would stop the new trend toward getting rid of recess. Atlanta is now building public schools without playgrounds. Girls love recess, but boys absolutely need it. Without recess, we will have more boys on Ritalin. The British are several years ahead of us. The British headmasters now understand that the worst thing a schoolteacher can do is to punish a boy by taking away recess. He'll be more unmanageable.

We have to find our way back to common sense and away from treating "being a boy" as a disorder in need of a cure.

**Sherokee Isle:** A doctor recently said that part of why boys are being prescribed medicine and why teachers don't like their behavior is that the boys can't read, so they aren't able to keep up with the class.

**Christina Hoff Sommers:** Oh, absolutely, this is very sad. Most American classrooms are run by women for girls. The girls are the ones who get the stars and win the prizes. I'm speaking in generalities, and there are always exceptions, but I'm talking about the average boy and girl: the probability that she will be a teacher pleaser and that he will not be that eager to please.

We have good data on that. The girls are much more committed to achievement. The Department of Education has done excellent studies on student preparedness. Boys are far more likely to arrive in class without books, pencils, and homework. By twelfth grade, males are four times as likely as

females not to do homework. Teachers once understood that it was more of a challenge to interest a boy and that they had to go out of their way to do it.

The feminist groups have changed our classrooms. Sandra Stotsky, a reading expert at Harvard University, reviewed junior high textbooks. If you look at these textbooks, she said, you could come away with the idea that the American West was settled by teenage girls traveling with their parents. Publishers have given in to feminist pressure to celebrate women's achievement. But they've gone overboard: textbooks are full of feminist filler, and men's achievements are downplayed.

The British, on the other hand, have been better at meeting boys' needs. They are returning to some old-fashioned, politically incorrect teaching methods. They're bringing back all-male classes for low-achieving boys; they seem to work. Imagine if you tried that here. The National Organization for Women would file a lawsuit the next day; they've done it already. In Britain, they are experimenting with boy-friendly teaching practices. They're even bringing back war poetry and adventure stories with male heroes; the boys like that. They're bringing back memorization and competition. Boys respond to fact-based learning.

But in American schools, competition is considered injurious to self-esteem. A friend of mine who played "geography baseball" in school in the 1950s—and as a result knows everything there is to know about geography—suggested it to a principal in a

public school in Virginia. The principal quickly dismissed the idea. The game was deemed too competitive.

We've been focused on the wrong things. We're trying to move away from competition and toward collaborative learning, where kids sit in groups and teach one another. British experts report that this doesn't work for most boys. Apparently, little boys will work cooperatively for about five minutes and then act up. British schools are going back to teacher-led classrooms. But, in the United States, there is almost no effort to find boy-friendly practices.

The result is that a large number of boys are academically far behind. The technical term is *disengaged*. It starts in junior high school, and once they get through seventh or eighth grade, it's very hard to get those children back.

In Britain, they have wonderful projects to save those boys. Here, we have nothing. When you bring it up—which I do—it's called backlash.

**Karen Erickson:** Do all-boy academies help middle-class boys with actively engaged fathers as much as lower-income boys without fathers in the home?

**Christina Hoff Sommers:** It's hard to say. We do have some wonderful boys' schools. In the Washington area, I visited the Landon School and the Heights School—boys from upper-middle-class and wealthy families—and I was impressed with the results, especially getting boys interested in literature, art, and music.

The fact is that boys from a variety

of ethnic and social backgrounds are falling behind the girls and could benefit from all-male schools or classes.

Scarsdale High—which is a public school in a wealthy suburb of New York City—has been strongly influenced by feminist politics. The boys have been ignored. But at one “gender equity” meeting, a male student meekly raised his hand and explained that he had done a little research. Girls at the school were getting better grades and were stronger students all round. A group of social studies teachers looked into the matter and found that the student was absolutely right.

At the very least, we should be experimenting with all-male classrooms and all-male schools. So far that has not happened. Why not?

Because in the United States, “gender equity” is defined by women's groups. In England, it's defined by school officials who care about all students. The American Association of University Women—I'm sorry to say this because it's an admirable organization with a distinguished history—went too far and has become dogmatic. It overstated how weak girls and women are and neglected the needs of boys.

You mentioned “actively engaged fathers.” In my book, I talk a lot about the critical role of fathers in the life of boys. Fathers, and other male mentors, play an indispensable role in the moral and intellectual development of boys. That is another reason we should try all-male academies and try to recruit more male teachers. But in the current environment, this is very difficult.

**Mitch Pearlstein:** On the question of journalists, politicians, academics, and others simply caving in to all this nonsense, they may in their heart of hearts know that it's nonsense, but publicly, they're intimidated and keep mum. Why?

**Christina Hoff Sommers:** The journalist Andrew Sullivan recently wrote, "Hell hath no fury like an American feminist." They are not pleased to be challenged, and they will call you names. In one of their newsletters, they called me a "gender-biased revisionist" and compared me to someone who would deny the Holocaust. It was outrageous, but that's how they think. They are very adamant.

With journalists, it's more complicated. I don't think that most reporters deliberately write false statistics and bad information, but when it comes to feminist "research," they're rather credulous and their ability to check facts seems to vanish. When the AAUW came out with its shortchanged-girls study, you would have thought that an experienced reporter like Susan Chira of the *New York Times* would have

sought out critical reaction. Had she bothered to call any number of experts on education, they could have told her that even in the early 1990s, boys were falling behind.

I called her and asked why she hadn't contacted critics. She said, "I'd rather not have this conversation. Goodbye." And she hung up.

Later she called me back and said she was ready to talk to me. I asked again why she hadn't sought out critics. She had wanted to, she said, but she was on deadline, she was traveling, and she didn't have time. She wouldn't write the story the same way again, she said, because we've learned so much more about boys.

The *New York Times* story about the AAUW shortchanged-girls study was so positive that the AAUW sent it out as part of their fund-raising packet. It was better than anything that an advertising firm could have written for them. The same is true of the *Time* magazine article on this study.

When it comes to feminist statistics, journalists' usual skepticism disappears. ■