

Book Review

The War Against Boys

By Christina Hoff Sommers

Simon & Schuster, 2015, 288 pages (paperback)

ISBN 9781501125423

Reviewed by:

Brittany Lansi, Graduate Student, Nipissing University

The War Against Boys by Christina Hoff Sommers is an eye opening discussion about boys' underachievement in education and how that will impact our economic future. After major waves of feminism and decades of trying to reform policies, strides in education for women have been massive. Women and girls today outperform men in nearly every measure of social, academic, and vocational well-being. But unfortunately at the same time, male underachievement has only gotten worse. Christina Hoff Sommers contends that it is time to take a hard look at our present-day realities and recognize that boys need our help. Our refusal to confront our reality that boys are suffering academically will harm our economic future. *The War Against Boys* is an incisive, rigorous, and heartfelt argument in favour of recognizing and confronting this new reality.

The Gender Gap

It is portrayed in the media that the gap in education is based on race and class but in reality, the main gap in education is gender-based (Sommer, 2013, 23-24). For evidence that boys are doing fine educationally, people have attempted to use the wage gap (Sommer, 2013, 25-26). Studies have revealed that there really isn't a wage gap between men and women (Sommer, 2013, 26). Instead, when comparing all relevant variables and

comparing oranges to oranges, women often make more money than men. Sommers discusses this when she states, “The 23-cent gender pay gap is simply the difference between the average earnings of all men and women working full-time. It does not account for differences in occupations, positions, education, job tenure, or hours worked required per week. When mainstream economists consider the wage gap, they find that pay disparities are almost entirely the result of women’s different life preferences— what men and women choose to study in school, where they work, and how they balance their home and career” (Sommer, 2013, 26). This was very surprising because the media still portrays this image that women are still disadvantaged and the gender gap is still prevalent in today’s society when in fact it is not true. Sommers does a great job of highlighting this information for her readers with evidence to back up her stance.

Classroom Strategies

Classroom strategies have changed to become more geared towards girls rather than boys. Sommers explains how our classrooms have shifted to become more feelings entered, risk averse, sedentary, and competition-free which are all movements away from the characteristic sensibilities of boys. There are many schools that have eliminated different types of games based on competition in order that no one’s feelings are hurt. Sommer lists many examples of this such as, tug of war, tag, and dodgeball. Sommers explains that activities in the classroom have become feelings and imagination-oriented rather than physical; “From the earliest age, boys show a distinct preference for active outdoor play, with a strong predilection for games with body contact, conflict, and clearly defined winners and losers. Girls, too, enjoy raucous outdoor play, but they engage in it less” (Sommer, 2013, 41). Actual aggression and rough and tumble play lines have been blurred by teachers and administration. In response boys are getting punished more for things that are not that serious, creating this zero-tolerance policy. All of this has led to more suspensions which is a direct indicator of boys becoming disengaged in school and therefore not going to post secondary education. The long-term effects of these classroom strategies in how boys relate to and perceive learning and school is very eye-opening. Sommers states, “In classrooms across the country little boys got the message that there was something wrong with them— something the teacher was trying to change. It is doubtful that these efforts at resocialization were ever successful. But they surely succeeded in making lots

of little boys confused and unhappy” (Sommers, 2013, 70). It is sad to think that we as a society have created this reality for boys. Sommers gives an insightful account of how our classroom strategies have impacted boys. While we may not realize that we have inadvertently caused boys to withdraw in education, we must use this information to rectify this situation.

Equal Opportunity or Equal Outcomes

Sommers discusses another point of contention when thinking about equality for boys and girls, which comes when we consider equal opportunity vs equal outcomes. When looking at the outcomes, female activists see disparity and cry discrimination, but equal outcomes is not a good measure of equal opportunity. Sommers gives a great example of this when she discusses Title IX. When considering college athletics, it was looked at like this: “If a college’s student body is 60 percent female, then 60 percent of the athletes should be female - even if far fewer women than men are interested in playing sports at that college” (Sommers, 2013, 166). Sommers continues by saying that in order to make the ‘outcome’ more equal, even though opportunity may be equal, colleges eliminate men’s sports teams in order to avoid government harassment, loss of funding, and lawsuits. The male athletes can’t far exceed the female outcome, but why should boys lose out on something important and beneficial to them just because females don’t care about it as much? Sommers explains that, “‘Title IX does not require quotas’, says the NCWGE. It simply requires the schools allocate participation opportunities nondiscriminatorily. But over the years, this diffuse requirement has been interpreted by judges, Department of Education officials, college administrators, and women’s groups to mean that women are entitled to ‘statistical proportionality’” (Sommers, 2013, 166). Disparity does not equal discrimination. Sommers does a good job of explaining this concept by using examples to back up her stance.

Conclusion/Recommendations

I believe that *The War Against Boys* is an important voice to have in the mix when you are thinking about gender differences and how kids learn, develop, and play. People should read this book and recognize the things we as a society need to pay attention to when it comes to our boys. Boys’ success and future in the world is integral to girls’ success and

future. There is no inferior or superior gender. As activists continue to denigrate the male gender and slap unfair labels on them as a group and then punish them for it, it causes boys to become more and more disadvantaged. I would recommend that everyone read this book, an often silenced perspective, and think about the ways we can encourage our boys to be engaged in school and learning, which will result in our boys being better developed and prepared for adult life. I believe that it is worth noting that this book was originally published in 2000 and then revised in 2013. Considering that we are now in the year 2024, I am sure some of the statistics are outdated and I would be curious to know which direction they are trending. I would guess that the trend toward focusing on females has continued, and it is likely that boys have fallen even more behind. I believe that this book has important information to share and it has made me uncomfortable with how much females are elevated at the expense of boys and men. With all the things we hear and see about gender equality, this book was very enlightening to read that showed how girls are actually doing and how we need to stop ignoring the boys. I definitely think this book is worth reading, it helps us think critically about the ways studies are conducted and used to mislead the population into potentially harmful policies.