

The War Against BOYS

HOW MISGUIDED
FEMINISM IS HARMING
OUR YOUNG MEN

Christina Hoff Sommers

Author of *Who Stole Feminism?*

Also by Christina Hoff Sommers
Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women

**Christina
Hoff
Sommers**

How Misguided Feminism



THE WAR AGAINST BOYS

Is Harming Our Young Men

SIMON & SCHUSTER
NEW YORK LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY
SINGAPORE



SIMON & SCHUSTER
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2000 by Christina Hoff Sommers
All rights reserved,
including the right of reproduction
in whole or part in any form.
SIMON & SCHUSTER and colophon are
registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Designed by Edith Fowler
Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sommers, Christina Hoff.

*The war against boys : how misguided feminism is
harming our young men / Christina Hoff Summers.*

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Teenage boys—United States. 2. Teenage boys—
United States—Psychology. 3. Feminism—United States.

I. Title.

HQ797.S6 2000

305.235—dc21 00-028517

ISBN 0-684-84956-9

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK could not have been written without the support of the W. H. Brady Foundation. As a Brady Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, I was able to devote all my time and efforts to this project. Elizabeth Lurie, Brady Foundation president, helped me with commonsense advice. She suggested, for example, that I avoid the overused and infelicitous word 'gender.' " 'Sex,' she correctly pointed out, is better than 'gender.' "

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is an ideal scholarly environment. There are all the stimulating colleagues. There is the exemplary support staff. And there is its president, Christopher DeMuth, the best dean I ever had. He graciously read through the entire manuscript and made many acute comments.

I am greatly indebted to Elizabeth Bowen, my brilliant research assistant at AEI. I have relied heavily on her counsel. She was indispensable in getting at the facts. Elizabeth made a lot of awkward phone calls to ferret out information I could never have obtained. On one occasion, she traveled through a blinding snowstorm to attend a seminar on boys. She designed several of the charts and graphs. Her judiciousness, her tireless efforts, and her uncanny ability to find almost anything on the Internet markedly enhanced the book.

Several interns at AEI contributed substantively to the research: Christina Bishop, David Houston, and Hugh Liebert. Hugh continued to help me when he returned to Harvard. He, too, carefully read drafts of the manuscript, offering insightful commentary on every chapter.

Bob Bender, my editor at Simon & Schuster, kept an eagle eye on my argu-

ment, always monitoring its cogency and constantly insisting that I adequately document its more controversial claims. His tactful, responsible oversight has made this a much stronger book than it would otherwise have been. Johanna Li, Toni Rachiele, George Turianski, and Edith Fowler ably shepherded the book through the production process.

My friends, old and newly made, were not spared. In one way or another, they were subjected to the ideas and themes of the book and forced into the roles of sounding board and critic. Chief among these are Evelyn Rich, Suzanne Cadisch, Diana Furchtgott-Roth, Claudia Winkler, and Erika Kors. I discussed the manuscript at length with Cathy Young. She often disagrees with me, but she is unfailingly helpful, full of apt and reliable information that she generously shares.

Several scholars strongly influenced me: Diane Ravitch, research fellow at the Brookings Institution; William Damon, director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence; Michael Gurian, author of *The Wonder of Boys*; and E. D. Hirsch, the famed English professor at the University of Virginia. I owe special thanks to American University professor Leon Clark and to his former graduate student Chris Garran for alerting me to the plight of the nation's boys in the early nineties.

When the fashion of male-bashing reached a new high in the early nineties, Camille Paglia alone had the courage to remind the male-averse feminists that masculinity is the "the most creative cultural force in history." I benefit as much from her dazzling example as a brave, incisive, funny, and outspoken intellectual as from her scintillating ideas.

My life has changed a lot since 1997 when I left Clark University and moved from Massachusetts to Washington, D.C., and not least because Sally Satel and Barbara Ledeen have become such dear friends. Sally and I share a passion for clear thinking and tough-mindedness and an aversion to pseudo-science and advocacy research. With good humor Sally has traveled with me to conferences where we were both unwelcome. Her perspective as a psychiatrist helped shape and strengthen my argument. Barbara Ledeen inspired me with her energy, her courage, and her integrity. I thank her for believing in this book and for organizing a number of forums for me to try out my ideas.

There is no adequate way to thank my husband, Fred Sommers, for all he has done helping me with this project. He is more interested in formal logic and metaphysics, but he patiently discussed every page with me. If he is tired of hearing about the plight of American boys, he has yet to let on.

My sons, David and Tamler, were always on the forefront of my consciousness, throughout the writing of *The War Against Boys*. They are the paradigmatic boys whose cause the book defends.

TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

CONTENTS

	<i>Preface</i>	13
ONE	Where the Boys Are	17
TWO	Reeducating the Nation's Boys	45
THREE	Guys and Dolls	73
FOUR	Carol Gilligan and the Incredible Shrinking Girl	100
FIVE	Gilligan's Island	124
SIX	Save the Males	138
SEVEN	Why Johnny Can't, Like, Read and Write	158
EIGHT	The Moral Life of Boys	179
NINE	War and Peace	207
	<i>Notes</i>	215
	<i>Index</i>	239

PREFACE

IT'S A BAD TIME to be a boy in America. As the new millennium begins, the triumphant victory of our women's soccer team has come to symbolize the spirit of American girls. The defining event for boys is the shooting at Columbine High.

"The carnage committed by two boys in Littleton, Colorado," declares the *Congressional Quarterly Researcher*, "has forced the nation to reexamine the nature of boyhood in America."¹ William Pollack, director of the Center for Men at McLean Hospital and author of the best-selling *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, tells audiences around the country, "The boys in Littleton are the tip of the iceberg. And the iceberg is *all* boys."²

Hundreds of boys attend Littleton's Columbine High. Some of them behaved heroically during the shooting there. Seth Houy threw his body over a terrified girl to shield her from the bullets; fifteen-year-old Daniel Rohrbough paid with his life when, at mortal risk to himself, he held a door open so others could escape. Later, heartbroken boys attended the memorial services. At one service, two brothers performed a song they had written for their lost friends. Other young men read poems. To take two morbid killers as being representative of "the nature of boy-

hood" is profoundly misguided and deeply disrespectful of boys in general.

This book tells the story of how it has become fashionable to attribute pathology to millions of healthy male children. It is a story of how we are turning against boys and forgetting a simple truth: that the energy, competitiveness, and corporal daring of normal, decent males is responsible for much of what is right in the world. No one denies that boys' aggressive tendencies must be checked and channeled in constructive ways. Boys need discipline, respect, and moral guidance. Boys need love and tolerant understanding. They do not need to be pathologized.

That boys are in disrepute is not accidental. That did not happen all at once. For many years women's groups have been complaining that boys are benefiting from a school system that favors boys and is biased against girls. "Schools shortchange girls," declared the American Association of University Women.³ "Teachers . . . pay more attention to boys—their learning styles, needs and futures, than to girls in all grades and all subjects," complains the Ms. Foundation for Women.⁴ A stream of girl-partisan books and pamphlets cites research showing that boys are classroom favorites given to schoolyard violence and sexual harassment.

The research commonly cited to support the claims of male privilege and sinfulness is riddled with errors. Almost none of it has been published in professional peer-reviewed journals. Some of the data are mysteriously missing. Yet the false picture remains and is dutifully passed along in schools of education, in "gender-equity" workshops, and increasingly to children themselves.

In this book I try to correct the misinformation and to give an accurate picture of "where the boys are." A review of the facts shows boys, not girls, on the weak side of an educational gender gap. Boys, on average, are a year and a half behind girls in reading and writing; they are less committed to school and less likely to go to college.⁵ In 1997, college full-time enrollments were 45 percent male and 55 percent female. The U.S. Department of Education predicts that the ratio of boys' entry into college will continue to worsen. But none of this has affected the "official" view that our schools are "failing at fairness" to girls. Diane Ravitch, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and former assistant secretary of education, has aptly remarked, "When will it be fair? When women are 60 percent or 75 percent of college enrollments? Perhaps it will be fair when there are no men at all."

In the mid-nineties, the new and equally corrosive fiction that boys as a group are disturbed was already accompanying the myth of short-changed girls. How our culture binds boys in a “straitjacket of masculinity” had suddenly become a fashionable topic. Prominent intellectuals, wielding great influence in education circles, gave respectability and power to the burgeoning save-the-males movement. There are now conferences, workshops, and institutes dedicated to transforming boys. Carol Gilligan, professor of gender studies at Harvard Graduate School of Education, writes of the problem of “boys’ masculinity . . . in a patriarchal social order.”⁶ Barney Brawer, director of the Boys’ Project at Tufts University, told *Education Week*: “We’ve deconstructed the old version of manhood, but we’ve not [yet] constructed a new version.”⁷ In the spring of 2000, the Boys’ Project at Tufts offered five workshops on “Reinventing Boyhood.” The planners promised emotionally exciting sessions: “We’ll laugh and cry, argue and agree, reclaim and sustain the best parts of the culture of boys and men, while figuring out how to change the terrible parts.”⁸

Questions abound. What sort of credentials do the critics of masculinity bring to their project of reconstructing the nation’s schoolboys? How well do they understand and like boys? Who has authorized their mission?

American boys face genuine problems that cannot be addressed by constructing new versions of manhood. They do not need to be “rescued” from their masculinity. On the other hand, too many of our sons are languishing academically and socially. The widening education gap threatens the futures of millions of American boys. We should be looking not to “gender experts” and activists for guidance but to the example of other countries that are focusing on boys’ problems and dealing with them constructively.

Like American boys, boys in Great Britain and Australia are markedly behind girls academically, notably in reading and writing. They, too, get most of the failing grades and are more likely to be alienated from school. The big difference is that British educators and politicians are ten years ahead of Americans in confronting and specifically addressing the problem of male underachievement. The British government has introduced a highly successful back-to-basics program into primary schools called the Literacy Hour. Its explicit purpose is to help boys catch up with the girls. The British are also experimenting with all-

male classes in coed public schools. They are again allowing “gender stereotypes” in their educational materials. They have found that boys enjoy and will read adventure stories with male heroes. War poetry is back. So is classroom competition.⁹

The plight of Britain’s schoolboys was an issue in the 1997 election. Estelle Morris, a Labour MP who is now the British Education Minister, said, “If we do not start to address the problem young men and boys are facing we have no hope.”¹⁰ So who in the United States is working to improve boys’ achievements? No one. No national organizations alert the public to boys’ academic shortcomings, no politically powerful groups lobby Congress to help boys. The climate for American boys is unfriendly. The mood in Great Britain is constructive and informed by plain common sense. The mood in the United States is contentious and ideological, and shaped by the girl advocates.

In the war against boys, as in all wars, the first casualty is truth. In the United States, the truth about boys has been both distorted and buried. I begin by showing how the plight of boys came to be buried and by whom. I then report on actual condition of boys, giving readers documented accounts of how boys are faring and suggesting what we can do to brighten their prospects. Boys badly need our attention. It is late, but not too late.