

Toxic masculinity is a harmful myth. Society is in denial about the problems of boys and men. We are tearing ourselves apart over gender issues, with the result that the problems of boys and men are left untreated.



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

"Toxic masculinity" is a counterproductive term. Very few boys and men are likely to react well to the idea that there is something toxic inside them that needs to be exorcized. When it comes to masculinity, society is sending a message that men are acculturated into certain ways of behaving, which can therefore be socialized out of them. But this is simply false. We are tearing ourselves apart over gender issues, with the result that the problems of boys and men are left untreated.

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My sons attended a school with a “culture of toxic masculinity.” It was perhaps not the first place you would look for it. Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School serves an affluent, liberal, highly educated suburban community just outside Washington, D.C. A third of the adults in the county have a graduate degree. Four out of five voted for Joe Biden. In 2019, the school district added a third option for student gender. If there is a liberal bubble, this is the bubble inside that bubble.

But in 2018 an incident occurred at the school that generated widespread media coverage, including CBS’s *This Morning*, ABC’s *Good Morning America*, and NBC’s *Today* show (“a reckoning on sexual harassment”), as well as in the *Washingtonian* magazine and *Washington Post*. The *Daily Mail*, a British newspaper, picked up the story. Here’s what happened. A boy at the school created a list of his female classmates, ranked in terms of their attractiveness, and shared it with a number of his friends, some of whom added their own opinions. Months later, one of the girls saw the list on another boy’s laptop. A number of girls complained to the school administration. The boy who created the list was reprimanded and given detention. A protest ensued. “It was the last straw, for us girls, of this ‘boys will be boys’ culture,” one of the young women involved told the *Washington Post*.

Part of a statement read out at a protest outside the principal’s office was the following demand: “We should be able to learn in an environment without the constant presence of objectification and misogyny.” Large meetings were held in the school to discuss culture. The boy who created the list apologized personally to the girls in question, and to the *Washington Post*. The school principal and two of the female students later participated in a panel discussion of the issue aired on C-SPAN.

This was one incident, at one school, at a particular moment in time. It blipped more loudly on my radar because it happened to take place at our local school. But what was instructive about the incident was the way it was immediately framed, especially in media coverage, as an example of “toxic masculinity.” If that is really the case, the term has acquired such a broad definition that it can be applied to almost any anti-social behavior on the part of boys or men.

It is one thing to point out that there are aspects of masculinity that in an immature or extreme expression can be deeply harmful, quite another to suggest that a naturally occurring trait in boys and men is intrinsically bad. Indiscriminately slapping the label of “toxic masculinity” onto this kind of behavior is a mistake. Rather than drawing boys into a dialogue about what lessons can be learned, it is much more likely to send them to the online manosphere where they will be reassured that they did nothing wrong, and that liberals are out to get them. Adolescent girls are after all capable of similar kinds of bullying and disrespect, often toward other girls, but it is not instantly cast as “toxic femininity.”

This incident at our high school highlights the first of four major failings of the political Left on issues related to boys and men, which is a tendency to pathologize naturally occurring aspects of masculine identity, usually under the banner of toxic masculinity. The second progressive flaw is individualism; male problems are seen as the result of individual failings of one kind or another, rather than of structural challenges. Third is an unwillingness to acknowledge any biological basis for sex differences. Fourth is a fixed conviction that gender inequality can only run one way, that is, to the disadvantage of women. I will address each of these four progressive failings in turn here, before turning in chapter 9 to the equally harmful response of the political Right.

Inventing toxic masculinity

Until around 2015, the phrase toxic masculinity warranted just a handful of mentions in a couple corners of academia. According to sociologist Carol Harrington, the number of articles using the term prior to 2015 never exceeded twenty, and almost all mentions were in scholarly journals. But with the rise of Donald Trump and the #MeToo movement, progressives brought it into everyday use. By 2017, there were thousands of mentions, mostly in the mainstream media. Harrington points out that the term is almost never defined, even by academics, and is instead used to simply “signal disapproval.” Lacking any coherent or consistent definition, the phrase now refers to any male behavior that the user disapproves of, from the tragic to the trivial. It has been blamed, among other things, for mass shootings, gang violence, rape, online trolling, climate change, the financial crisis, Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and an unwillingness to wear a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lumping together terrorists and delinquents, it ultimately poisons the very idea of masculinity itself. Interviewing dozens of adolescent boys and young men for her book *Boys and Sex*, Peggy Orenstein always asked them what they liked about being a boy. She says most drew a blank. “That’s interesting,” one college sophomore told her. “I never really thought about that. You hear a lot more about what is wrong with guys.”

Toxic masculinity is a counterproductive term. Very few boys and men are likely to react well to the idea that there is something toxic inside them that needs to be exorcized. This is especially true given that most of them identify quite strongly with their masculinity. Nine in ten men and women describe themselves as either “completely” or “mostly” masculine or feminine. These gender identities are held quite strongly too. Almost half of men (43%) said their sex was “extremely important” to their identity. In another survey by Pew Research Center, a similar proportion of men (46%) said that it was either very or somewhat important for others to see them as “manly or masculine.” (In both surveys, the numbers were even higher for women.) In other words, most people identify pretty strongly as either masculine or feminine. It is a bad idea to send a cultural signal to half the population that there may be something intrinsically wrong with them.

“The toxic masculinity . . . framing alienates the majority of nonviolent, non-extreme men,” argues the feminist writer Helen Lewis, “and does little to address the grievances, or counteract the methods, that lure susceptible individuals toward the far right.” Given the survey results just described, it may not be great politics either. Half of American men and almost a third of women (30%) now think that society “punishes men just for acting like men,” according to a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute. There is a partisan split, as you might expect. Three in five Republicans agree, compared to only about one in four Democrats. Religion plays a role too. Half of both white Protestants and Black Protestants, for example, agree that men are punished for acting like men (50% and 47%, respectively).

Pathologizing masculinity may even undermine support for feminism. Fewer than a third of American women now describe themselves as a feminist. In 2018, YouGov polled those women who did not identify as feminist for their views on feminism. Almost half (48%) said that “feminists are too extreme” and that “the current wave of feminism does not represent true feminism” (47%). One in four (24%) said that “feminists are anti-men.” These findings should give progressives some pause. In the rush to condemn the dark side of masculine traits, they are in grave danger of pathologizing the traits themselves. Many women are uncomfortable with this trend. And to the boy or man who feels lusty or restless, the message, implicit or explicit, is all too often, there is something wrong with you. But there is not. Masculinity is not a pathology. As I showed in chapter 7, it is, quite literally, a fact of life.

Blaming the victim

The second big flaw in progressive thinking on men and masculinity is individualism. Usually, progressives are reluctant to ascribe too much responsibility to individuals for their problems. If someone is obese, or commits a crime, or is out of employment, the progressive default is to look first to structural, external causes. This is a valuable instinct. It is all too easy to blame individuals for structural challenges. But there is one group that progressives do seem willing to blame for their plight: men. YouTuber Natalie Wynn describes the stance well: “We say ‘look, toxic masculinity is the reason you don’t have room to express your feelings and the reason you feel lonely and inadequate.’ We kind of just tell men, ‘you’re lonely and suicidal because you’re toxic. Stop it!’”

Carol Harrington believes that the term toxic masculinity plays an important role here, since it naturally focuses attention on the character flaws of individual men, rather than structural problems. If men are depressed, it is because they won’t express their feelings. If they get sick, it is because they won’t go to the doctor. If they fail at school, it is because they lack commitment. If they die early, it is because they drink and smoke too much and eat the wrong things. For those on the political Left, then, victim-blaming is permitted when it comes to men.

The pandemic illustrated this individualistic tendency well. Men are considerably more vulnerable to COVID-19. Globally, men were around 50% more likely than women to die after contracting the virus. In the U.S., about 85,000 more men than women had died from COVID by the end of 2021. For every 100 deaths among women aged 45–64, there were 184 male deaths. The result was to cut 2 years off the average predicted life spans for American men, the largest drop since World War II, compared to a decline of 1 year for women. In the UK, the death rate among working-age men was twice as high as for women of the same age. These differences appear not to have made any impression on public health officials or policymakers, however, even when they were aware of them.

The higher male death rate also received almost no attention from health institutions or media. When it was acknowledged, the main explanations provided were that men were either more vulnerable because of preexisting conditions related to “lifestyle” factors, such as smoking or alcohol, or to a lack of responsibility with regard to safety measures, for example, mask wearing. In short, if men were dying, it was their own fault. But this was not true. The gap in mortality is not explained by sex differences in rates of infection, or in preexisting conditions. The difference is biological.

The sex differences in Covid mortality make it clear that we need more of what feminist health care advocates have been urging for decades: more gender-specific medicine, including clinical trials that break down the results and side effects by gender. “Over the past two decades, we’ve radically revised how we conduct medical research and take care of our female patients,” writes Marianne J. Legato. “I now believe that . . . it’s time to focus on the unique problems of men just the way we have learned to do with women.”³⁵ A good first step would be to establish an Office of Men’s Health in the Department of Health and Human Services, to mirror the excellent one that already exists for women, and with equivalent funding of \$35 million. The Affordable Care Act should also be expanded to provide men with the same coverage that allows women to get a free annual health checkup. Given the disparate impact of COVID-19, we do have to ask, if not now, when?

When it comes to masculinity, both the Left and the Right fall into the individualistic trap, but from different perspectives. For conservatives, masculinity is the solution; for progressives, masculinity is the problem. But they do both agree that the problem lies at the level of the individual, and therefore in the realm of psychology, rather than economics, anthropology, or sociology. This is a

profound intellectual error. Given the scale of the cultural shifts of recent decades, simply lecturing boys and men to get with the program is not a good approach. “There’s a contradiction in a discourse that on the one hand claims that male privilege, entitlement and the patriarchy are the most powerful forces of oppression humanity has ever created,” writes the Guardian commentator Luke Turner, “and on the other would (understandably) like men to process this quickly, and without fuss.”

Science is real

One of the rallying cries of the modern political Left is that “science is real.” While conservatives succumb to myth and misinformation, progressives carry the enlightenment torch of reason. At least, that is how they see things. The truth is that there are science deniers on both sides. Many conservatives deny the environmental science of climate change. But many progressives deny the neuroscience of sex differences. This is the third major weakness in the progressive position.

There is strong evidence for a biological basis for some differences of psychology and preferences between the sexes, as I showed in chapter 7. The genetic psychologist Kathryn Paige Harden writes, “Genetic differences in human life are a scientific fact, like climate change. . . . That genetic and environmental factors are braided together is simply a description of reality.” But for many progressives, it is now axiomatic that sex differences in any outcomes or behaviors are wholly the result of socialization. When it comes to masculinity, the main message from the political Left is that men are acculturated into certain ways of behaving (generally bad ways, of course, in this version), which can therefore be socialized out of them. But this is simply false. Men do not have a higher sex drive just because society valorizes male sexuality, even if it does. They have more testosterone. Likewise aggression. Remember, boys under the age of 2 are five times more likely to be aggressive than girls. This is surely not because 1-year-olds have picked up gender cues from around them.

To be fair, there are some reasonable concerns about how this science will be used. The philosopher Kate Manne worries that “naturalizing” any inequalities between men and women can have the effect of “making them seem inevitable, or portraying people trying to resist them as fighting a losing battle.” She is right in principle about this danger. Natural differences between men and women have often been used to justify sexism. This is mostly an outdated fear. In recent years, most of the scientists identifying natural differences have, if anything, tended to stress the superiority of women. But even careful scientists who continue to argue for a role for biology are caricatured as being “reductive” or engaging in “sex essentialism.”

One way around this problem is to adopt the approach taken by Melvin Konner in *Women After All*, and conclude that while biology matters a great deal, it is only in a way that favors females. In fact, there is some evidence that people in general are more comfortable with the idea of natural differences if women come out ahead in the comparison. Alice Eagly and Antonio Mladinic call this the “WoW (women-are- wonderful) effect.” With regard to sex drive, for example, Konner is able to write that “to think that these differences result merely from cultural arrangements is naive in the extreme.” But this blunt, true statement follows the moralizing claim that “regardless of how natural men’s [sexual] needs may be, I can’t see that those divergent preferences are equally admirable.”

The appeal of this approach is obvious. It allows for a discussion of biological differences but in a way that underlines the pathologies of men, thereby ensuring a warmer reception among liberal scholars and reviewers. But in some ways this is the most dangerous message of all: men are naturally different than women, but only in ways that are bad. Konner’s apparent disdain for higher male sex drive, for example, veers dangerously close to puritan ideas of sexual sin. It is not helpful to claim that either men or women are somehow naturally better than the other. We are just, on

average, different in some ways that can be either negative or positive depending on the circumstances and the way the differences are expressed.

One-way inequality

The fourth major failure of the political Left is an inability to recognize that gender inequalities can — and increasingly do — run in both directions. In 2021, President Biden created a White House Gender Policy Council, a successor to the previous Council on Women and Girls, which had been abolished by Donald Trump. But while the name changed, the mission did not. The formal charge of the new Council is “to guide and coordinate government policy that impacts women and girls.” In October 2021, the Council published a National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, the first in U.S. history.

The strategy is entirely asymmetric. No gender inequalities related to boys or men are addressed. The fact that women now outnumber men in college is noted, but only in order to highlight the fact that women hold more student debt than men. This is absurd. It is like complaining that men pay more income tax because they earn more. There is no mention at all in the strategy of the sizable gender gaps in favor of girls in K–12 education. The need for reform of school discipline policies to help Black girls is emphasized, but there is no mention of the specific challenges of Black boys (even though they are twice as likely as Black girls to be suspended or expelled). The goal of increasing access to health insurance for women is highlighted, but nothing is said about the fact that men are at a higher risk of being uninsured than women (15% v. 11%).

I could go on, but you get the picture. You might wonder how much this lack of even-handedness matters, especially if you are skeptical about the impact of White House strategy papers. But this one will drive policy. The strategy directs all government departments and agencies to “establish and prioritize at least three goals that will serve to advance the objectives identified in this strategy, and detail the plans and resources needed to achieve them in an implementation plan.” Flawed thinking makes for bad policy.

Introducing its new strategy, the White House declared that “the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a health crisis, an economic crisis, and a caregiving crisis that have magnified the challenges that women and girls... have long faced.” This was in line with an almost universal tendency to emphasize the negative implications of the pandemic for women, while ignoring those for men. The main gender story has been the catastrophic impact on women’s progress. “One of the most striking effects of the coronavirus will be to send many couples back to the 1950s,” wrote Helen Lewis, in *The Atlantic* in March 2020, adding, “Across the world, women’s independence will be a silent victim of the pandemic.” The headline on a gloomy *Washington Post* article by Alicia Sasser Modestino was “Coronavirus Child-Care Crisis Will Set Women Back a Generation.” In December 2020, the Aspen Institute Forum on Women and Girls declared that “COVID-19 has eroded the little progress we have made on gender equality.”

Almost every major think tank and international organization in the world produced reports on the negative impact of the pandemic on women, many written in a hyperbolic tone. By comparison, the much higher risk of death from COVID-19 for men warranted barely a mention. Nor the sharp drop in male college enrollment. Of course, the pandemic was mostly just bad all around. But it was bad for women in some ways, and bad for men in other ways. We can hold two thoughts in our head at the same time.

The assumption that gender gaps run only one way even gets embedded in inequality measures. Every 2 years, the World Economic Forum (WEF) produces its Global Gender Gap Report. It is the most influential international study of progress toward gender equality, but like the White House

strategy, it is distorted by asymmetric thinking. To compile the report, a gender equality score is calculated for each nation, between 0 (complete inequality) and 1 (complete equality). The score is based on fourteen variables across four domains—economics, education, health, and politics. (Each variable in the index is also calculated on a 0–1 range.) In 2021, the U.S. scored 0.76 on the scale and placed thirtieth in the world. Iceland, in first place, scored 0.89.

But crucially, no account is taken of domains where women are doing better than men. As WEF's number-crunchers explain, "The index assigns the same score to a country that has reached parity between women and men and one where women have surpassed men." Across the fourteen measures, U.S. women are now doing as well or better than men on six. In higher education, for example, the actual gender parity score is 1.36, reflecting the large lead that women have over men on this front. But the number factored into the index to generate the overall U.S. score is not 1.36. It is 1. The idea that gender inequality only counts in one direction is baked into WEF's methodology. But this assumption is untenable, especially in advanced economies. My colleague Fariha Haque and I have recalculated the WEF rankings, taking into account gender inequalities in both directions. We also removed one of the fourteen variables, a subjective survey of the pay gap of dubious quality, and weighted all the domains equally (WEF gives more weight to variables with the widest gaps). Our two-way Approach pushed the U.S. score up to 0.84 and Iceland's up to 0.97. As our paper shows, it also changed the country rankings, in some cases quite significantly.

The point here is not to devalue the work done by the Gender Policy Council, or WEF, or any of the other organizations aiming to improve the position of women. Closing the gaps where girls and women are behind remains an important policy goal. But given the huge progress made by women in recent decades and the significant challenges now faced by many boys and men, it makes no sense to treat gender inequality as a one-way street. On a practical level, it leads to a lack of policy attention to the problems of boys and men. But ignoring glaring gender gaps that run in the other direction, I believe, also robs these efforts of the moral force of egalitarianism. "There is now wide consensus that gender inequalities are unfair, and lead to wasted human potential," says Francisco Ferreira, Amartya Sen Chair in Inequality Studies at the London School of Economics, commenting on education gaps. "That remains true when the disadvantaged are boys, as well as girls."

What is required here is a simple change in mindset, recognizing that gender inequalities can go in both directions. I said simple, not easy. The fight for gender equality has historically been synonymous with the fight for and by girls and women, and for good reason. But we have reached a point where gender inequalities affecting boys and men have to be treated seriously. Many people on the political Left seem to fear that even acknowledging the problems of boys and men will somehow weaken efforts for women and girls. This is the progressive version of zero-sum thinking. Anything extra for boys and men must mean less for girls and women. This is entirely false as a matter of practice, and creates a dangerous political dynamic. There are real problems facing many boys and men, which need to be addressed, and if progressives ignore them others will be sure to pick them up.

Our politics are now so poisoned that it has become almost impossible for people on the Left to even discuss the problems of boys and men, let alone devise solutions. This is a missed opportunity. We need the strongest advocates for gender equality, many of whom are on the liberal side of the political spectrum, to take a more balanced view. Otherwise, the danger is that boys and men will look elsewhere. "Thousands of years of history don't reverse themselves without a lot of pain," says Hanna Rosin. "That is why we are going through this together." Rosin is right about the pain. But she is wrong about facing it together. We are in fact tearing ourselves apart over gender issues, with the result that the problems of boys and men are left untreated.