

Of boys and men: Why the modern male is struggling, why it matters, and what to do about it

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Book Review

Of boys and men: Why the modern male is struggling, why it matters, and what to do about it

By Richard V. Reeves

Brookings Institution Press, 2022, 298 pages (hardcover)

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Reviewed by:

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Despite all the talk in the media and organizational news reports about the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion it seems that one group in particular has been overlooked: males. In *Of Boys and Men* author Richard Reeves presents his research on how the males of today are losing their place in the world and are struggling to adapt to a society that seems to no longer need or care for them. For anyone interested in learning about males in modern society, this book is a must-read.

Of Boys and Men has three overarching themes: education, career, and family. For some people, what Reeves presents in this book may be a bit of a shock. There is a dominant belief that the western world is a patriarchal society, with men dominating in every facet. Despite marketing that calls for increased supports for women in girls in academia, at every level of schooling it is males that are falling behind in academic achievement. While some may believe that workplaces are dominated by men who earn more than women, the reality is that males are having a significantly harder time finding meaningful employment and the purchasing power of their wages has stagnated to the point where working-class men are worse-off today than they were fifty years ago. While the societal roles of women have been meaningfully expanded to include being a career woman as well as a mother and wife, men have seen their roles and purpose erode leaving many to feel they

have no place or value to society. Reeves calmly and carefully explains each situation as he unravels the tale of changing societal roles and expectations of men and women.

The plight of males in education is quite simple: they are disappearing. In grade school, males are falling behind in critical skills like reading and writing. The percentage of males graduating high school and entering post-secondary education has been declining for several decades. The major cause that Reeves points to is a discrepancy between biology and the structure of school systems: male and female brains development differently. At the age when students are entering school, female brains are about a year ahead in development compared to males. Starting behind by such a large amount (at the age of four or five, a one-year difference in development is substantial) creates problems further down the academic road. It is not until high school that some male students begin to catch up in academic achievement. By that point, for many males, it may be too late as evidenced by declining rates of males graduating high school and entering post-secondary. Reeves offers a potential solution to this discrepancy through something called “red-shirting” where boys start school one year later than girls. This education problem contributes to the next major issue that men are facing: careers.

The number of males in the workforce has been declining for decades, and a third of males with only a high school degree are not working. Automation and free trade have removed many blue collar jobs that traditionally went to males with lower education such as manufacturing. While Reeves acknowledges that the increase of females in the labour market contributes to the competition for jobs, Reeves does not lay the blame for increased competition and stagnant wages at the feet of females entering the workplace. On the contrary, Reeves lauds the efforts of female contributions to the economy and encourages further work to get more women into high paying leadership positions. His aim in this section is to draw attention to the fact that “on the economic front, many men... have also lost ground, as women have surged ahead” (p. 43).

The previous two challenges seem to culminate in the third: the male role in the family. As women have entered the workforce, they have become less reliant on the traditional role of a husband as a provider; marriage is now a “social choice rather than an economic necessity” (p. 44). Despite the changes to how women are perceived as being able to provide for family, perceptions of men have not. Men are still likely to be judged as a potential mate by their breadwinning potential. Reeves writes that “the role of mothers has been expanded to include breadwinning as well as caring, but the role of fathers

has not been expanded to include caring as well as breadwinning” (p. 45). As Reeves pointed out in the first two sections, bringing home the bread is becoming harder for men.

Reeves also takes the time to address how politics and policy affect the issues that men face. Reeves describes how both the political left and right are failing to address the issues that males are facing and are instead using these issues for political gains. According to Reeves, the political left frames men and masculinity as a problem that must be solved to advance women, while the political right proposes a reclaiming of traditional concepts of men and masculinity as a solution. The different poles of the political spectrum also fail to agree on whether there are differences between males and females, what they might be, and if they exist, how they arise. Reeves describes how males are “created” through combination of both biology and culture. Reeves provides evidence for the existence of biological differences between the sexes, but also points out that “these sex differences can be magnified or muted by culture” (p. 95). Additionally, Reeves discusses the acute difficulties faced by black boys and men, and males in lower socio-economic classes for whom the problems that males in general face are exacerbated.

Reeves has an incredible ability to take complex problems and present them in a way that is easy to comprehend. He does an excellent job at striking a balance between describing how advances for women have sometimes negatively impacted men, without attributing blame or seeking ways to go back in time to undo progress. He presents logical solutions to many issues that are tempered with a healthy dose of realistic expectations. Both sexes face complex challenges that affect individuals and society at large, but while we acknowledge and work towards solving the challenges of women and girls, societal discourse tends to ignore or downplay the challenges of men and boys.

This book is an excellent resource for parents of males, teachers of males, leaders, and anyone who is interested in creating a diverse world that supports both males and females.