WOMEN VS FEMINISM

Why We All Need Liberating from the Gender Wars

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Why We All Need Liberating from the Gender Wars

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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WOMEN VS FEMINISM

This book offers a critique of the new feminism that has become so fashionable today. Its focus is on the lives of women in comparatively wealthy, Western societies, most specifically the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Ardent followers of social media and academic debates will no doubt retort that there is not one type of feminism but many, and nuanced positions can't be lumped together. They have a point, of course. But at the same time there is a dominant feminist narrative that fills newspaper columns, book shelves, speeches at the United Nations and guidance for teachers. This is a feminism that cannot be defined by the sexuality or skin colour of its proponents. Yet it clearly espouses one idea above all others: that women are disadvantaged and oppressed; routine victims of everyday sexism, casual misogyny and the workings of patriarchy. The better women's lives become, the harder it seems that a new generation of feminists must try to justify their purpose through uncovering ever more obscure problems.

This book is in three parts. Part one looks at women's experiences today in education, at work and as mothers.

Although women are doing better than ever before, and often better than men, there is also recognition that life is not as good as it gets – for either women or men. But the problems we face are rarely those identified by feminist campaigners. Part two explores the growing disjuncture that has emerged between the statistical successes women are ratcheting up and the persistent narrative of female disadvantage. We see how a feminism premised upon the notion of women as victims increasingly seeks to regulate not just our behaviour but our innermost thoughts and feelings. The final part of this book considers what feminism once was and what it represents today. The historical gains of feminism provide a context to its current limitations.

PERMISSIONS

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PREFACE

Criticising feminism does not come naturally to me. As a child growing up under the shadow of my country's first female prime minister, I knew for certain that feminism was important. I wore a badge given to me by my mother with a picture of a washing line and the slogan 'wages for housework'. I had a postcard stuck to my bedroom wall showing a line drawing of two babies peering earnestly into their nappies. 'Oh! So that explains the difference in our salaries!' read the caption. I even had a T-shirt with a picture of a man and woman having a drink: 'Men's brains are heavier than women's brains,' said the stick man before, in the next picture, falling on to the floor head first. I never once doubted that a woman could do anything a man did – so of course that made me a feminist.

In my first year at university, I helped to make a banner for a 'Take Back the Night' march, although I never actually made it on to the demonstration. I can't ever remember feeling afraid walking alone at night. I'd love now to be able to say that my refusal to march was a protest against being told, for the first time, that I should see myself as a victim. The truth is that I wasn't critical of this new direction in feminism so much as bored with it. As part of my degree in English Literature, I had become far more familiar with work by literary critics like Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Toril Moi than I was with Shakespeare, Chaucer or Dickens. Criticism became reduced to 'sexism spotting' and it

didn't seem to matter whether the author was male or female, writing in this century or the seventeenth, our aim was to expose the misogynistic assumptions apparent in the text. Simply appreciating good quality writing was not considered sufficiently academic.

QUESTIONING FEMINISM

The first time I publicly confessed to doubts about feminism, I took myself by surprise. In an attempt at rehabilitating my post-maternity leave teaching career I began a Master's Degree in Education at my local university. One week we learnt about projects to empower girls, to interest them in science and to encourage them to go to university. It was worthy and inspiring stuff but for one issue that was not acknowledged: girls were doing better at school than boys and had been for over a decade. When I raised this with my tutor I was told, 'No one expressed concerns when boys were doing better than girls.' So, I thought, perhaps this is just historical retribution, payback for all those years in which girls lost out. Perhaps that was what feminism now meant.

The following week we learnt about a school initiative to raise awareness of, and ultimately prevent, domestic violence. Children were to take part in various activities such as discussions and role-play exercises, each carrying the same message: women and girls were at risk in their own homes and fathers, husbands and brothers were the violent perpetrators. I thought of my own boys, then aged three and one. I wanted to protect them from knowing about domestic violence; I was devastated by the implication that they somehow carried guilt by association, that their essential maleness, their masculinity, was something dangerous and inherently threatening.

If feminism meant ignoring boys falling behind at school, and telling girls to fear members of their own families as well as half of their classmates, then it wasn't something I wanted anything to do with. I hadn't planned to say this out loud. I didn't even realize it was what I thought until the words left my mouth. But the shock that greeted my outburst was something that I remember vividly. My tutor and my classmates were all equally horrified: 'But you're a woman!' 'You've benefited from feminism!' 'Feminism just means equality and of course you believe in equality!' Although as students we were instructed in the importance of critical thinking, challenging the direction of feminism and its significance to education was clearly a step too far. Being critical meant employing a feminist perspective; it did not mean questioning it. I can't remember what the intended learning outcome was for that particular class but I was clear about my own take home message: when it comes to criticizing feminism, 'You can't say that!'

THE DIFFICULTIES OF WRITING

Since this time I've spoken at public meetings and written articles questioning a feminism that seems to have grown increasingly distant from the reality of many young women's lives. As a result, I'm no stranger to the strength of feeling criticizing feminism evokes. But the more I've been confronted with fourth-wave or intersectional feminism, the more I've become convinced it is detrimental. As I explore in this book, the feminism we have today seems all too often to demonize men and degrade women by imbuing them with a false sense of their own victimhood. My determination to challenge these ideas meant that I began writing this book with relish. As a woman who has always had an interest in

feminism, I thought writing a book on the subject would be easy. Perhaps even fun.

My bravado did not last for long. As I soon realized, a critique of feminism cannot be separated from an evaluation of women's lives. On paper, women are doing better than ever before and, particularly when younger, better than men. But in reality it doesn't always feel this way and the popularity of feminism speaks to a sense of dissatisfaction with life as it currently is. The progress women have made can only be understood when seen in relation to the oppression women experienced in the past. Likewise, women's experiences at school, work and in the home today only make sense when viewed alongside men's lives. Writing about this did not prove to be straightforward; one problem was simply knowing where to start and stop.

Neither feminism nor women's lives have developed as one coherent narrative. Different women experience the world very differently. Feminism is, and always has been, fractured and diverse, emphasizing different issues in new eras. What looks like progress in one direction is matched by moves sideways and backwards in other areas. A book must have a beginning, middle and end and this necessity risks sweeping over contradictions and ignoring the nuances of an argument. I am fearfully aware that many feminist scholars, with far more academic credibility than me, have dedicated entire careers to exploring, in detail, issues that I merely prod and poke here.

Over the course of writing this book my bravado has been tempered by humility. What's here is not intended to be a definitive answer to the twenty-first century's 'woman question'. Instead, it's a series of themed essays that I hope might puncture what seems to be the current consensus around women's lives and raise questions about the direction and purpose of feminism today.

PART ONE

WOMEN'S LIVES TODAY

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CHAPTER ONE

SCHOOLING FOR SUCCESS

Schools are on the front line in the gender wars. St Paul's Girls' School in West London is one of Britain's leading independent schools. Having wealthy parents is not enough to secure entry; potential pupils must also pass a competitive exam. Former students include famous actors, authors, academics and Members of Parliament. In February 2017 St Paul's made the news following the announcement of a new 'gender identity protocol' that would permit pupils to take boys' names and wear boys' clothes. From the age of 16, girls will now be able to request that their teachers refer to them as boys or address them using gender neutral pronouns. One report suggests ten current pupils want to take advantage of the new guidance.[1]

St Paul's is playing catch-up to the more forward-looking Brighton College, another independent boarding school. A full year earlier, Brighton College announced that the distinction between boys' and girls' school uniforms had been abolished in order to accommodate transgender students. A statement issued by the school noted that, 'Public schools are usually seen as bastions of conservatism but Brighton College

feels it is time to break ranks.'[2] Meanwhile, delegates at the UK's National Union of Teachers conference passed a motion calling for children as young as 2 to be taught about transgender issues and same sex relationships.[3] In American universities students in some classes are asked to state their preferred gender pronouns when they introduce themselves, and debates about the provision of gender neutral bathrooms have become a national talking point. In Sweden it became a legal requirement for schools to challenge gender stereotyping in 1998.[4] Teachers are encouraged to use 'hen' as a gender neutral pronoun to avoid propagating sexist assumptions.

In the past, a combination of socialization and coercion meant girls were denied access to the same educational opportunities as boys. Girls were less likely to study a full range of academic subjects; they achieved lower exam results and did not carry on to university at the same rate as men. Feminists successfully challenged the low expectations schools and teachers held for girls, and today, as this chapter shows, a very different picture emerges. At every stage of their education, girls are now outperforming boys and yet the influence of feminism on education shows no signs of diminishing.

Education is increasingly viewed by teachers, campaigners and policy makers as a key site for influencing the next generation and shaping society. As such, national governments charge schools with responsibility for an array of economic and political goals such as skills training, entrepreneurship and social mobility. It can seem as if there is no problem that can't be solved by putting it on the curriculum: schools teach children about sex and relationships, healthy eating, internet safety, environmental awareness, budgeting and a whole host of other issues. Teaching subject knowledge is blurred with a more explicit promotion of values, at the forefront of which is feminism. Schooling has taken on board political goals

concerned with encouraging children to think about gender and sexuality in new ways. This chapter explores the impact of feminism upon education and asks what girls' educational success means today.

GIRLS ARE OUTPERFORMING BOYS

Girls do better at school than boys. All around the world, irrespective of the status of women or the levels of gender equality within a society, it is girls who are notching up more exam passes in almost every subject and at every level.[5] This is not a recent phenomenon; in both the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), girls have been outperforming boys for well over a quarter of a century. Neither is it the case that girls are doing just a little bit better than boys; they are so far ahead that some British universities now have twice as many female undergraduates than males.[6] Meanwhile, in America, over 60 per cent of all bachelor degrees are awarded to women.[7]

A gender attainment gap emerges almost as soon as children start school. At age seven, British children take national curriculum assessments in reading, writing, speaking and listening, maths and science. Girls do better than boys in every area with the biggest attainment gaps occurring in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Boys do marginally better at reaching the highest levels in maths and science.[8] By the time they are 16, girls perform significantly better than boys in national assessments (in England and Wales, GCSEs). In 2016 the attainment gap between boys and girls at this age was the largest in over a decade at 8.9 per cent. 71.3 per cent of GCSEs taken by girls were awarded at least a C grade, compared to just 62.4 per cent of exams sat by boys.[9] Success aged 16 leads to a greater number of female students

continuing along an academic route to take 'A' levels aged 18, the exams still most closely associated with university entry. It's not just in the UK: in the US too girls are more likely to receive a high school diploma. In 2014 in the State of California, 84.7 per cent of girls graduated from high school compared to only 77.1 per cent of boys.[10]

Success at school results in more women than men going on to university.[11] Gender has come to be more closely correlated with the likelihood of attending and graduating from college than family income. Research from the American Brookings Institute suggests that 'the female advantage in college attendance and completion among recent cohorts is about half as large as corresponding gaps between students in the first and second quartiles of the income distribution'.[12]

In Britain, women students first began to outnumber men at university in 1992 and this has remained the case every year since. In 2015 young British women were 35 per cent more likely to go to university than their male peers and 57.5 per cent of students were female.[13] On some courses, such as veterinary science and subjects allied to medicine, over 75 per cent of students are now female. What's more, women are more likely to stay the course, complete their studies, and perform better than men. Whereas 79 per cent of women get at least a 2.1 degree classification, only 70 per cent of men score this highly.[14] Importantly, this attainment gap exists even when comparing the results of students who entered university with exactly the same levels of prior academic achievement. American women are also going to university in greater numbers than men and doing better once there: they are less likely to drop out and more likely to attain a higher degree classification. In 2008, US universities awarded more doctorates to women and this has remained the case every subsequent year.[15] In 2015, American women taking postgraduate degrees outnumbered men by 135 to 100.[16]

A DRAMATIC CHANGE

The educational performance of girls has undergone a phenomenal transformation over a relatively short period. Up until the late 1980s, it was boys who did better at school and men who went on to university in greater numbers. Well into the latter half of the twentieth century, boys and girls rarely received the same education. Assumptions about the lives children would lead as adults meant boys and girls studied different subjects: boys studied woodwork or metalwork, while girls were taught the domestic skills considered necessary for their future role as wives and mothers alongside some academic subjects. There was often little expectation that girls would continue on to higher education or pursue a career.

Women first began to go to university in greater numbers following the expansion of higher education in the decades following the Second World War, although this was limited to predominantly middle-class women. By 1970, women comprised roughly 30 per cent of the UK student population. Some women who were students at this time report 'endless derision' from an older generation of male academics who questioned, sometimes publicly, their right to be at university. This could extend to not marking work completed by women, refusing to allow them to take part in seminar discussions or subjecting them to mockery in the lecture hall. The battle to overturn not just the practical restrictions that limited women's access to education but the attitudes of both male and female family, friends, teachers and lecturers was long and hard fought. Feminist campaigners strove to improve educational opportunities for girls and their success is evident in the improvement in girls' performance we see today.

Nowadays, in most Western countries, it is taken for granted that boys and girls should have the same educational opportunities. Although boys and girls might, on average,

perform better in different subjects, or prefer some subjects to others, students tend not to be excluded from particular classes on the basis of their gender. Likewise, although single sex schools still exist, they teach a national curriculum, or the common core in the US, and generally enter pupils for nationally recognized exams. It is mostly accepted that boys and girls can learn the same subjects in the same school, sitting side by side.

It was in the 1980s that girls started outperforming boys at school and increasingly continuing on to higher education. Since this time, the educational landscape has changed very quickly. In America, the proportion of women in work with a college degree trebled between 1970 and 2014, increasing from 11.2 to 40.0 per cent.[17] The pace of change means that commentators and educators alike have been left behind. Having been used to considering girls as the underrepresented and disadvantaged group, the new reality of girls outperforming boys provides an inconvenient challenge to the traditional feminist narrative. In response, many campaigners have either doubled down on their original claims or searched for more specific areas in which girls can still be said to be underperforming in comparison to boys, such as in physical sciences and computer studies. A backlash to this dominant narrative, in the form of a panic about the underachievement of boys, is beginning to emerge. As a result, an honest appraisal of the educational performance of both boys and girls is difficult to establish.

UNDERACHIEVING BOYS

In July 2016 the British charity *Save the Children* published an evocatively-titled report, *The Lost Boys*, in which it sought to lay bare 'the potentially devastating and lifelong

consequences for boys in England who start school significantly trailing girls in basic early language skills'. It highlighted the fact that 'boys are nearly twice as likely to fall behind girls by the time they start school'.[18]

One group has attracted particular cause for concern: white working class boys. In 2016, only 26 per cent of white British boys on free school meals (shorthand for a family on a very low income or state benefits) achieved five top GCSE grades including English and maths – the benchmark for school success. This compared with 40 per cent of black boys and 63 per cent of all other pupils on free school meals. Martin Daubney, a journalist concerned with men's issues and the founder of the *Men and Boys Coalition*, describes poor white boys as 'the new educational underclass'.

In America, by contrast, it is black boys who are getting left behind. According to research carried out by the American National Education Association (NEA), 42 per cent of black students attend schools that are under-resourced and performing poorly and black boys are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their white classmates. Black and Hispanic boys make up almost 80 per cent of those enroled in special education programmes. Although black males comprise 9 per cent of the student population, they constitute 20 per cent of all students classified as 'mentally retarded'. The NEA's 2011 report, *Race Against Time: Educating Black Boys* highlights that 'less than half of black male students graduate from high school on time' and 'only 11 percent of black males complete a bachelor's degree'.[19]

For the first couple of decades after girls began to outperform boys at school and go onto higher education in greater numbers, relatively little attention was paid to the comparative drop in boys' performance. Girls were considered merely to be correcting a historical injustice and taking advantage of

the opportunities that should have always rightfully been theirs. Worrying about the underachievement of boys was seen as a ploy to detract attention and hard won resources away from girls. Even today the underperformance of boys is often played down. In 2014 the British government noted: 'The problem of white "working class" underachievement is not specific to boys; attention to both sexes is needed'. Daubney notes that 'boys have had few political allies in the corridors of power. Nobody, it seems, cares about our failing boys'.[20] Dr Gijsbert Stoet, professor of cognitive psychology at Leeds Beckett University agrees: 'When it comes to boys falling behind, the real scandal is that this isn't a scandal', he argues. We can only imagine the outcry if girls had been falling behind boys for the past three decades.

Most recently, championed by the likes of Daubney, attention has focused on the need for 'boy friendly' pedagogy and male role models in schools. One project, based in New York and launched in 2015, aims to recruit 1000 male teachers of colour over 3 years. Mary Curnock Cook, the Chief Executive of the UK's university admission service, UCAS, has raised concern about the men apparently 'missing' from higher education. Widening participation initiatives that once focused solely on the educational achievements of girls have slowly begun to shift attention to boys.

In contrast to well-established projects designed to encourage girls to study science, campaigns aimed at boys tend to be piecemeal and underfunded. More worrying are the assumptions driving such initiatives. The University of Edinburgh's *Educated Pass* scheme, for example, aims to get boys 'hooked' on university through links with local football clubs.[21] Not only is there an assumption that all boys are interested in football, there is clearly a view that higher education is not exciting in its own terms and boys need to

be 'tricked' into participating through conversations about football.

THE MOST INTELLIGENT GENDER

The growing gender attainment gap has given new impetus to attempts at drawing a connection between gender and intelligence. Biological explanations for intelligence once focused on men's larger brain size but today, in a complete about turn, neuroscientists point to the female brain developing earlier than the male brain. Researchers from Michigan State University have found evidence of superior cognitive ability in girls as young as 2, with girls between 2 and 7 performing better than boys in tests of general intelligence.[22] This early advantage is then said to stick with girls throughout their time in formal education.

This turn to biology presents a view of gender differences as 'hardwired' and intelligence as an innate characteristic that can be measured and recorded, much like height or eye colour. However, whereas no one would seriously seek to make a link between eye colour and intelligence, correlations between gender and intelligence are looked for and then found. Some, like the University of Cambridge psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, rehabilitate old stereotypes. He argues: 'The female brain is predominantly hardwired for empathy. The male brain is predominantly hardwired for understanding and building systems.'[23]

As Cordelia Fine notes in her excellent debunking of the science behind sex differences, 'The neuroscientific discoveries we read about in magazines, newspaper articles, books and sometimes even journals tell a tale of two brains – essentially different – that create timeless and immutable psychological differences between the sexes.'[24] Unfortunately, as Fine

explains, however neat the link between brain differences and gendered ways of thinking and behaving may appear, such claims 'simply reflect – and give scientific authority to' majority opinion. 'When we follow the trail of contemporary science,' Fine counters, 'we discover a surprising number of gaps, assumptions, inconsistencies, poor methodologies, and leaps of faith.' The problem for neuroscientists is that 'the culture in which we develop and function enjoys a "deep reach" into our minds'.[25] The world in which children develop today is one that assumes girls will outperform boys and, unsurprisingly, this is exactly what many researchers then find.

Understanding intelligence as innate and gendered separates an abstract notion of intelligence from, on the one hand, what it is that an individual knows and, on the other, what it is that society formally values and rewards. A baby may be born with the potential to learn but until this potential is nurtured by parents, teachers and eventually the individual themselves, they know little. The neurophysiologist Ruth Bleier argues that when it comes to intelligence, 'Biology can be said to define possibilities but not determine them; it is never irrelevant but it is also not determinant.'[26] In other words, the experiences and circumstances individuals find themselves in, and how they choose to respond to those circumstances, have a huge influence on someone's intelligence.

WHAT GETS MEASURED, COUNTS

Common sense appears to suggest a connection between school success, exam performance and intelligence, but it may be the case that exams measure little more than an ability to answer exam questions. Academic success means different things in different subjects, schools and cultures. It might

mean a capacity to comply with expectations, memorize and recall facts, think creatively and independently or solve problems logically. As what is measured by exam success changes, so too will the children deemed to be successful.

The qualities, skills and knowledge that teachers and national education systems value and assess change over time. In the UK, girls began to outperform boys when traditional exams began to be replaced by new forms of assessment that put more emphasis on coursework completed throughout the school year. A belief in intelligence as innate and gendered would lead us to the view that this new 'feminized' approach favoured girls. This was expressed at the time by Masden Pine, writing in *The Spectator*:

> *The old exams – O-levels, A-levels and degree finals – tended to reward the qualities which boys are good at. That is, they favoured risk-taking and grasp of the big picture, rather than the more systematic, consistent, attention-to-detail qualities which favour girls. The old O-level, with its high-risk, swot-it-all-up-for-the-final-throw, and then attempt not more than four out of nine questions, was a boys' exam. The GCSE which replaced it places much more emphasis on systematic preparation in modules, worked on consistently over time. It is not surprising that girls have done better since the change was made, since GCSEs represent the way girls work.*[27]

Interestingly, however, a gender gap in educational attainment began to open up at around the same point in other countries all over the world which had not made such fundamental changes to school assessment methods. As the American philosopher and 'factual feminist' Christina Hoff

Sommers notes in her book *The War Against Boys*, 'In 1985, boys and girls took AP (Advanced Placement) courses at nearly the same rate. Around 1990, the girls moved ahead of boys and never looked back.'[28] We clearly need to look beyond just changes in assessment methods to explain why boys began to fall behind girls.

One explanation for the improvement in the performance of girls might lie in economic changes that happened in the 1980s, in particular, the collapse of many traditionally male-dominant occupations, which began with the recession that hit the UK in 1980 and the US a year later. The new more service-driven economy that was to emerge favoured the skills women had to offer. Perhaps for the first time, many more girls than ever before could see the rewards available to them with school success. Hanna Rosin, writing in *The End of Men*, notes that, 'In 1967, 97 per cent of American men with only a high school diploma were working; in 2010 just 76 per cent were.'[29] Perhaps some girls also realized that marriage and children no longer provided a financially viable future.

Hoff Sommers points to another development that can be traced back to the late 1980s: a new 'therapeutic sensibility' that she describes as rejecting 'almost all forms of competition in favor of a gentle and nurturing climate of co-operation'. This points to a broader shift in the emphasis of schooling and the role of the teacher that occurred at this time: from discipline to care and from the transition of knowledge to the cultivation of skills and values. Rewarding students for caring and co-operating reinforces the behaviour patterns that girls are socialized into demonstrating from a very young age. Meanwhile, Hoff Sommers suggests, this new approach to schooling is 'a sure-fire way to bore and alienate boys'.[30] In this context, England's move away from high stakes exams can best be understood as a reflection of

this broader 'therapeutic sensibility' and simply one factor among many that contributed to the growing success of girls.

GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

Measuring intelligence in very young children is likely to tell us far more about the stimulation they have received from family members and their environment since being born than about innate properties of the brain. The expectations of parents, teachers and children themselves will have an impact upon a child's perception of their own intelligence, their confidence and their willingness to put themselves forward for new challenges. Research conducted at the University of Kent suggests that girls see themselves as cleverer, more successful and harder working than boys from the age of just 4. By the age of 7 or 8, boys come to share this view and they also think that girls are more intelligent than boys.[31] On the other hand, a different research project suggests that by age 6, girls believe brilliance is a male trait.[32] Although this research has been used to point to the damning impact of gender stereotypes, it may, ironically, reinforce among girls the view that they need to work hard to achieve success – a virtue which is ultimately rewarded.

Gendered expectations can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as girls live up to the high standards set for them while 'boys will be boys' excuses poor performance. As sociologist Frank Furedi argues, 'Many teachers and parents have internalised the premise that boys are naturally distracted in the classroom and are less focused and less intellectually curious than girls.'[33] Lower expectations of boys are particularly evident when it comes to reading. A former secondary school Head of History recalls attending a parents' meeting in which a literature teacher stressed how important it was for boys to

see their fathers enjoying reading. The advice to those present was, 'Dads: just pretend!' The idea that men might genuinely enjoy reading was clearly unimaginable.

Children are very good at confirming the expectations others hold of them and as our expectations of girls have changed so too has their educational success. One illustration of this is recent research showing that in top-level maths the male advantage 'has shrunk to an all-time low'.[34] An analysis of exam results suggests long-held assumptions about girls performing less well than boys in this area can no longer be taken for granted. Mathematician Hannah Fry, commenting on the research, noted: 'We have a cultural tendency to view maths as a male subject, so girls were socialised to think of themselves as mathematically incompetent.' 'However,' she continues, 'the difference in maths performance of boys and girls is not universal. In Asia and the Middle East, girls often outperform boys. It suggests any problems we have in getting girls to perform in maths are cultural rather than an innate difference in ability.'[35] One conclusion is that the original cause of men's superior mathematical ability must have been down to social and cultural factors rather than innate intelligence. This means that the remaining gender attainment gap in maths could eventually disappear altogether. We can see then that gender does have some influence on educational attainment but rather than this being a biological and causal relationship, it has far more to do with cultural factors and is only one of many explanations for academic success.

OVERSTATING GENDER

Explaining educational success and failure through the prism of gender appears to be common sense. All the data about exam passes and university attendance presented in this

chapter point to a link between gender and performance but this doesn't necessarily mean that gender is the single factor most likely to determine academic success. As David Didau, a teacher turned author and well-known educational blogger, puts it, 'I'm not suggesting gender has nothing to do with attainment – it probably does have *some* bearing – but maybe a lot less than we're inclined to believe.'[36]

When I spoke to Didau he told me that drawing a link between gender and attainment is tempting 'because it appears so plausible and the data really does seem indisputable. On average, girls are outperforming boys'. He continues, 'The "pattern" of boys' underachievement is compelling because of the way we think about gender: girls are quiet, hard-working and sensible; boys are immature, unruly and easily bored. But as any teacher and every parent could tell you, these are stereotypes – shorthand that saves us from having to think about reality.' Didau explains there may be many reasons for the apparent relationship between gender and attainment that actually have little to do with gender, or more specifically with sex as a biological category. 'When it comes to interpreting data, it is possible to read into statistics what the researcher wants to find. This doesn't mean that a link between gender and attainment is not there, but if the researcher had looked for relationships between left-handedness, or even house number, and attainment they may have found a similar correlation.'[37]

In 1986, the feminist writer Juliet Mitchell noted that, 'When I started working on the topic of women in 1962, it was virtually impossible to get the differential information on the sexes – I remember how particularly hard it was in the field of education. Everything was broken down into socio-economic groups. Today I find the reverse: it is easy to obtain information on male/female differences but not on social class achievements and positions.'[38] It may well be the case that

the attainment gap that appeared in the late 1980s was not new at all – but simply that at this point, as a result of pressure from campaigners and researchers such as Mitchell, school success started being correlated with gender for the first time.

A closer look at who goes to university also suggests that perhaps the link between gender and educational success has been overstated. For example, Subjects Allied to Medicine, the disciplinary grouping in which the gender participation gap is widest, is a relatively new category in the university landscape. Traditionally, nursing and occupational therapy, careers dominated by women, were not graduate professions. Taking training out of hospitals and relocating it within universities meant that, at a stroke, more women became university students. Likewise, in my lifetime primary school teachers did not need a university degree and, when government policy made this a requirement, women who would have previously attended teacher training colleges became university students. When Subjects Allied to Medicine and Education are removed from the higher education statistics then 'the disparity in the total number of male and female higher education students' reduces 'from around 281,000 to just 34,000'.[39] Women still outnumber men in traditional academic subjects but the discrepancy is far more modest.

Didau argues that behaviour and attendance are two factors that can predict educational success far more accurately than gender, and with this we return to expectations. When it comes to girls' success, he tells me, 'It might not be an innate difference but rather cultural expectations that are being measured. Whereas teachers and parents expect girls to do well and set them high standards, they expect boys to struggle. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and boys meet the low expectations people have for them.' Girls, meanwhile, might be highly rewarded for behaviours that have little to do with

intelligence. To illustrate this Didau tells me about a study that showed the extent to which exam markers were influenced by handwriting and disproportionately rewarded candidates with neat handwriting who, in turn, were more likely to be girls. Handwriting, Didau explains, would be a good example of a trait more connected to cultural expectations than biology: 'whereas girls gain kudos with their peers for having neat writing and police each other in this regard, boys are more likely to see messy writing almost as a badge of pride'.

IS GIRLS' SUCCESS WORTH CELEBRATING?

The emphasis on neat handwriting and good behaviour calls into question what girls' achievement at school really represents. Increased attention has focused on girls' schooling at a time when there has been a change in what education is perceived to be for. The founders of the first girls' schools, such as Frances Mary Buss who established the North London Collegiate School in 1850, wanted girls to have the same educational opportunities as boys. They were clear that this meant access to the same subject knowledge. Today, as we will explore in more detail in Chapter Nine, the idea of education as a vehicle for the pursuit and transmission of knowledge has become problematized. The curriculum no longer emerges from a recognized canon of 'great books' but is instead contested as different groups argue for the inclusion of their favoured issues on the syllabus.

Teaching has always been a profession dominated by women and ideas about feminism and women's rights have, over several decades, had an influence upon practice in the classroom. The point at which second-wave feminism began to take off in earnest coincided with a broader move to

question the role of education – and particularly of the knowledge taught – in reproducing social class, racial and sexual inequalities. There were moves to make teaching more 'child centred' and progressive; pedagogy became more focused on child development than on direct instruction. Rejecting a traditional curriculum and teaching methods created the space for a more values-driven approach to education with feminist ideas to the fore. Teachers began, rightly, to question the gendered assumptions that prevented girls from achieving their full academic potential. But when girls began to be more successful it was in a different educational context, with different values and standards.

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, education has come to be concerned with a range of instrumental goals connected to employability and tackling social problems. The achievements of girls may indicate that they are better at complying with the explicit and implicit rules this new type of education involves. Far more than boys, girls are still socialized to conform and 'be good'. This leaves them better able to demonstrate the behavioural norms expected of them first by teachers, then by university lecturers. I clearly remember the day my then four-year-old daughter came home from school, her jumper adorned with a huge sticker. She told me the teacher had given it to her for 'sitting nicely'. My heart sank a little: I didn't want her to see 'sitting nicely' as the aim of her time in school.

The boys in her class who chose to run around rather than 'sit nicely' presumably got no such reward. Hoff Sommers notes that 'girls reap large academic benefits from good behaviour and accommodation to the school environment'.[40] By the time they reach higher education, students are no longer rewarded for sitting nicely; however, marks given out for group work, attendance and participation reward similar behavioural characteristics. Girls today might be getting

more exam passes but in order to achieve this they are not expected, like students in the past, to immerse themselves in a particular subject or to know a great deal. Instead, educational success depends upon diligence, dedication and obedience.

This privileging of compliance spills over into the realm of emotion. Anti-bullying initiatives and sex and relationships classes, history and literature lessons all demand an empathetic and emotionally correct response from pupils. Understanding and demonstrating 'emotional literacy' can be more all-consuming of a pupil's sense of self than mastering a body of knowledge.

TEACHING VALUES

The teaching of knowledge has been replaced not just by a new set of skills but also by new values, at the heart of which is feminism. Feminism in schools is taught quite explicitly; not as part of the history syllabus or a topic in a citizenship or politics course but as a distinct set of practices children are expected to comply with. Lesson plans, written by and for teachers, show how feminism can be taught to even the youngest children. One suggests: 'You can introduce a global view of women's rights, as well as a musical touch, with this series of lessons on women's rights and music in West Africa. It uses case studies and musical clips to explore geography, rhythm and the way music raises the voices of women and girls in their struggle for equality.'[41]

Teaching feminism often means tackling traditional gender stereotypes through the promotion of positive role models and the choice of books, posters and displays in class. Teachers are advised that 'Building a positive self-image for girls needs to be woven into the fabric of education'.[42] In the

UK, the National Union of Teachers has published advice on 'challenging gender stereotypes through reading'. It notes, 'Many men and women feel constrained by the narrow roles assigned to them by societal pressures, and girls and boys are expected to conform to narrow ideals of masculinity and femininity from a very early age.'[43] As a result, it recommends books with characters that 'challenge some of the conventional ideas of what girls and boys enjoy and aspire to – and act as positive role models as children seek to establish their own individual identities'.

Of course, providing children with a wide range of reading material is to be welcomed. But politicizing children's reading choices and denigrating traditional gender roles is unlikely to instil a love of reading. Teachers are encouraged to use books as a prompt for raising particular issues. For example, one book aimed at very young children comes with the suggested discussion point: 'What does Dad mean when he says that 'dogs don't do ballet'? Why does he think that? For example, could it just be that he hasn't met a ballet dancing dog before – or perhaps because he has some stereotypical ideas about what dogs do – and what they don't?' Not only is this, frankly, bizarre – dogs don't do ballet! – more significantly, in any class of young children there will no doubt be some girls who love ballet and some boys who don't. There may also be some dads who think ballet is not for boys. Indeed, this lesson aims to challenge exactly such views. But however politically well-intentioned teachers may be, criticizing the views and values of home and parents vastly alters the remit of the school away from education and towards the promotion of a distinct political outlook.

As girls get older they may be pointed in the direction of books about feminism or to workshops promoting women's careers in science and technology. Speakers such as Laura

Bates from *Everyday Sexism* are frequently invited to address school assemblies. One resource for teachers to use in Personal, Social and Health Education lessons involves a video featuring Bates who, we are told, 'began the *Everyday Sexism Project* to highlight how often sexist behaviour and even sexual assaults go unchallenged and unreported'. In the short film, 'women tell their distressing stories of everyday sexism, and invite us all to help make it stop by shouting back'.[44] At a time when, as this chapter has shown, girls are doing so much better at school than boys, using class time to reinforce a message of female victimhood and male chauvinism uses education to inculcate in children with a particular view of the world.

The desire to influence children's most private thoughts and their individual sense of themselves is evident in official guidance on tackling the use of sexist language and behaviour given to teachers. One guide states:

> *We are aware that there is a spectrum of gender identity and that gender is wider than the binary of boys and girls and males and females. This is one of the reasons why gender stereotyping is unhelpful and damaging as sexism leads us to believe that boys and girls should present themselves in certain ways. Transphobia and homophobia can result from this. However, the focus of this guide is on identifying and challenging sexism, gender stereotyping and sexist and sexual language to prevent negative impacts on the wellbeing and aspirations of girls and young women.*[45]

The role of the teacher becomes policing the values, thoughts and language of children to bring them in line with one particular ideological outlook. In America, elementary

school teachers are advised to 'refrain from phrases such as 'that's just for girls' or 'boys will be boys', which, only serve to reinforce a false binary. Allow dedicated time for coeducation, as some age groups may self-select into exclusively single-sex interactions if left to their own devices.'[46] Not all adults believe that gender is 'on a spectrum' and not everyone believes that girls and young women require a special focus on their wellbeing and aspirations. Policing the interactions of the playground for children's political errors is a major incursion into a child's capacity to develop independent thought.

The explicit promotion of feminism in schools does not benefit girls who are taught from a young age that they are disadvantaged. For boys the denigration of masculinity can have an even more deleterious impact as they are left feeling guilty and ashamed for simply being boys.[47]

Women in Science

As girls generally perform better at school than boys, at least in terms of passing exams, feminists focus their efforts upon the few remaining subject areas where boys still appear to have the edge. The relative underperformance of girls in science and technology subjects garners a great deal of attention. Science is said to have a 'woman problem'.[48] Yet at age 16 British girls outperform boys in all science subjects. Aged 18, boys perform marginally better (under one per cent) at maths and chemistry, but girls do better in further maths, biology, computer science and physics.[49]

At university, particular attention is drawn to physics and electrical engineering, where women undergraduates in British universities comprise fewer than 20 per cent of

students. However, across a broader sweep of subjects, the difference is less stark: roughly 55 per cent of students studying for a first degree in science are men compared to 45 per cent of women.[50] Even this statistic understates women's achievements in science: in subjects allied to medicine and veterinary science women comprise over 75 per cent of students.[51] Women's progress in these competitive vocational subjects is significant because it leads on to careers in science. The scarcity of men from medicine and veterinary science courses is rarely considered to be a problem.

The number of women already studying science at undergraduate level and embarking upon careers in science has not put an end to high profile campaigns such as Women Into Science and Engineering (WISE). In the UK, universities strive to achieve a gender equality charter mark for science, overseen by the Equality Challenge Unit's Athena Swan initiative.[52] Universities pour considerable resources into securing these awards that aim to recognize commitment to 'advancing women's careers in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine' all the while ignoring the huge inroads women have made into the study, research and teaching of science over recent decades. Today, such schemes can appear to be solutions in search of a problem.

Solutions that Create Problems

I discussed with physics teacher Gareth Sturdy the initiatives he has observed that aim to get more girls studying science. He tells me about 'extra extracurricular physics clubs specifically designed to be 'girl friendly' that involve students making jewellery based on Feynman particle

diagrams; taking selfies using pinhole cameras, and of course – lots of cake!' Sturdy is quick to point out that, 'These are often led by good, very well-intentioned teachers', and he tells me such clubs can be very successful, 'When these activities are advertised, many more girls turn up and as a result some schools have seen a huge increase in the number of girls continuing to study physics beyond the age of 16, especially if there is a strong female role-model.'[53]

Sturdy's concerns are to do with the message such clubs send about the nature of the subject: 'Of course, if you have cake or jewellery making, or you give chocolates out for right answers you will attract more students. But there is a danger that these are just gimmicks and the students don't always gain a great deal intellectually. It becomes a problem if the activities begin to make physics more gendered than it is already. At the end of the day, if girls will only do physics if jewellery and cake are involved, they're not necessarily suitable candidates for the subject.'

Whereas school campaigns to get girls into science can inadvertently reproduce gender stereotypes, the ongoing awareness raising about the problems women face in science, which becomes most acute in higher education, risks giving young women a false impression that pursuing careers in this area will involve them having to confront prejudice and hostility. In a further irony, it is mostly women who complete the paperwork and audits necessary to apply for gender equality awards such as Athena Swan, presumably in the time their male colleagues are writing research papers and applying for grants.

GIRLS UNDER PRESSURE

Girls are more likely than boys to leave school with a clutch of certificates but this success increasingly seems to come at a price. There is growing concern about the number of women and girls reporting mental health problems such as anxiety and depression or engaging in self-harm. Much of this is no doubt explained through a desire, by adults, to see children, perhaps especially girls, as vulnerable and to interpret everyday emotions through a prism of mental illness. However, it might also be the case that girls are under more pressure than in the past to meet the expectations of teachers and peers in relation to educational success. The issue of women and mental health will be explored more fully in Chapters Four and Five.

A further price to be paid for school success may come later in life. Although girls' diligence and obedience is rewarded with certificates that help them secure a university place and enter well-paid professional careers, it may be less beneficial in the longer term. Women are made into capable and diligent employees but progressing to the higher levels of some careers can require leadership, risk taking and an element of self-promotion. These tend to be the very qualities girls have been socialized out of through their education.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Beyond the workplace, women who become mothers can rapidly find themselves back in the classroom. As we will explore more fully in Chapter Four, today's parents are expected to play a far greater role in relation to their child's education. Many schools require parents to sign up to 'home

school partnership agreements' or 'contracts' which specify the obligations of parents regarding everything from getting their children to school on time and regular attendance at parents' evenings to overseeing reading and times tables practise.

While schools take over many of the duties traditionally carried out by parents, such as teaching about sex, relationships and healthy eating, they expect parents to take greater responsibility for teaching reading and supervising homework. Such expectations have currency because parents want their children to succeed at school and they come to accept that their input as parents determines educational success or failure as much as schools and teachers. The primary responsibility for parenting tends to fall disproportionately upon women who are often positioned as the 'main carer' by schools. Schools, in turn, assume the duties of the mother extend far beyond loving, nourishing and caring for her children and must also encompass a regular commitment to her child's education.

CONCLUSIONS

The gender attainment gap appears to be both stark and growing with girls having successfully overturned centuries of limited educational opportunities and now, not just equalling the achievements of boys, but outperforming them at every level. Girls are doing better at school than ever before and young women are notching up considerably more exam passes and degree certificates than their male contemporaries. This success leaves them better positioned to enter the world of work. But exam results only go so far in liberating women.

Girls outperform boys in an education system that is seen as a key site for the socialization of children into particular

values. Many teachers assume that if children were socialized differently then gender inequality could be eradicated and that this, more than teaching any particular body of subject knowledge, is their primary goal. When language use and behaviour is policed, then doing well at school can demand an exacting emotional toll and risk binding women to a lifetime of conformity.

Most recently, attention has been drawn to the underachievement of boys, and education is becoming a key battleground in the gender wars. It seems that girls and boys cannot just be 'pupils' or 'students' but, from their earliest days at school, must represent their gender. This may appear to benefit girls more than boys in the short term, but, in the longer term benefits no one. More than anything else, fighting a gender war through schools and universities is to the detriment of education.