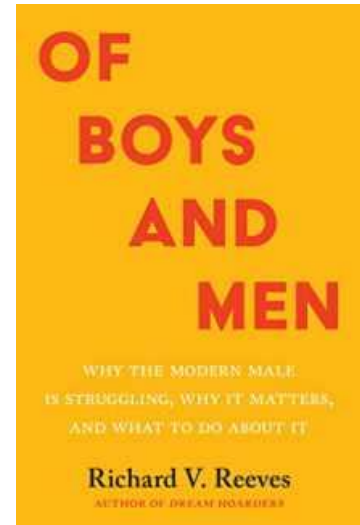


“A Non-partisan Appraisal of Gender Equity”
a review by Dick Burkhart

“Of Boys and Men - Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why it Matters, and What to do About It”

By Richard Reeve (2022)



This is a very readable and well-informed book about why and how gender equity needs to help men, not just women. The most glaring statistic is that 60% of 4 year college students today are women, who also have a higher graduation rate (66% vs 60%).

Yet, the gender disparities hit working class families the hardest, where the man is still expected to be the breadwinner but his pay has stagnated for two generations while employment has shifted dramatically to women. The response has been a gargantuan fall in the marriage rate, a corresponding escalation in out-of-wedlock births, an opioid epidemic and “deaths of despair”. Also, young men are often left floundering - lacking purpose, meaning, and direction in their lives. The result is that “deaths of despair are almost 3 times higher among men than women” (p 60).

Working men in other developed countries, such as the UK (think Brexit), have also been hit hard by neoliberal globalization and local deindustrialization. In the US, Reeves claims that black men have suffered the most, especially in comparison to black women, due to one parent households and lack of good role models.

However, he fails to note countervailing trends in health statistics for race and gender, especially life expectancy for those lacking a high school degree (Health Affairs, 2012, Oshansky, et al). For poor white men who’ve reached age 20, life expectancy dropped from 71.6 years in 1990 to 70.0 in 2000, then 68.3 in 2008, while for poor black men it rose from 64.3 years in 1990 to 66.8 in 2000, then 67.7 in 2008 – almost reaching equality. Meanwhile the corresponding stats for poorly educated white women are truly horrific – a 5 year drop over 18 years, from 79.4 down to 74.1, versus up from 74.5 to 74.8 years for poor black women.

Boys start falling behind during middle school simply because their prefrontal cortex develops more slowly, with a 2 year female / male performance gap at age 16. In addition, 23% of boys are diagnosed with a “developmental disability”. The damage is so often lasting that Reeves recommends an extra year of preschool for boys as a

standard practice, called “redshirting”. It turns out that many affluent families are already doing this.

Government policies and programs often hurt and rarely help boys or men, especially in welfare-type programs. In fact, these have long been criticized for contributing to family breakdown, since their “the man is the breadwinner” assumption ignores reality. Even educational programs, such as getting more students into college, which are meant to be gender neutral, typically help girls, not boys. Reeves advocates for more support for vocational schools, since they often work better for boys in practice, and black activists like John McWhorter agree.

Reeves positions himself in the middle on the gender wars. He roundly denounces calls from the right to revert to the 19th century family structure, but also calls out those on the left who use anti-male language like “toxic masculinity”. Science, he says, shows that gender is both nature and nurture, and there is also human agency within this nature/nurture context. So he lays out the commonly known male and female tendencies (reason vs feelings, confidence vs worry, aggression vs conciliation, tinkering vs talking, etc.) as what we must deal with, not attempt to either deny or reject.

Instead Reeves emphasizes that these male/female tendencies strongly overlap gender boundaries – that the differences within the genders far exceed the statistical averages between them. So more male engineers and fewer male nurses is fine – but only up to a point. In particular he concludes that we need far more male teachers to provide good role models for boys, especially since studies actually show that boys learn better language skills from male teachers. In other words, balance girls into STEM programs with boys into HEAL programs.