



# THE BOYS

*are not* ALL RIGHT

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By: Janice Gross Stein

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Why angry young men are the most alarming geopolitical concern we're facing today—and why that is a women's issue.

Janice Gross Stein is the founding director of the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy at the University of Toronto and a renowned expert on national and international politics. At last fall's Minerva Summit, she spoke to attendees about what she believes is the most pressing geopolitical concern of our current moment: angry young men. How did we get here? As she explains, the problem starts in the education system. And what does this have to do with women? More than you might think. Below, find an edited version of her address.

Boys are a geopolitical issue of the highest order. They're a national issue in our own country and south of the border in the United States, and they're a community issue right here at home. We have a boy problem—one that begins at the earliest stages of our educational system and goes right through to our graduate schools.

Let's look at public schools. I have a five-and-a-half-year-old grandson, and he has a limited capacity to sit; he likes to run around. He's in Grade 1 and he has to sit at a desk for an hour, but that's an eternity for him. The reason boys have more trouble in public school than girls—leaving aside that women are smarter much earlier in life and that men have had trouble, historically, catching up because our brains evolve at different paces—is because executive func-

dropout rate for boys approaches what we would see in the Global South, and it's not low in Ontario either. Think about what happens to a boy who doesn't get a high school degree. If you were a boy 40 years ago and didn't get a high school degree, you could work in the transportation sector—you could drive a truck and you'd make a good living. What's going to happen to truck drivers in our society within the next five years? Trucks will be driverless. There will be fewer jobs.

It is not much better in universities. I teach graduate students and undergraduate students at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, where 70 percent of students are women. There is no evidence that we are systemically discriminating against boys—it's the pool of

women. That's a 15 percent gap, and it's getting bigger and bigger every year. If I compare the data from 2025 to 2015, the gap has grown by 8 percent. We are seeing men with increasingly less promising careers. Now, it is true that there are still more men in engineering and computer science, so there are sectors of our economy in which women still have not broken through. But the bigger story is that when women break through, they very quickly, within a matter of years, become the dominant group in the higher educational system.

What do women do when they're unemployed and they have trouble getting a job? We volunteer. We network. We get together. We form an organization. There's a series of strategies that are intuitive to women. What do men do when they're unemployed? They

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tion comes much later for boys, biologically, than it does for girls. So, sitting for a girl is easier. For most boys, at six, it's very challenging. We don't design our school system to accommodate these differences. One could teach math by saying to a boy: “How many minutes does it take you to run around the school yard? And how many minutes if you have to do it once, twice, or three times?” so they could learn multiplication and division. Boys learn by doing when they're little, but we don't design classrooms for boys. That's partly why boys are identified as early as Grade 3, Grade 4, and Grade 5 as behavioural problems—because of the environment that they're forced into.

What happens in high school? It gets worse. Many more boys are suspended than girls. In the province of Quebec, the

applicants, and our applicants come from around the world. It's the same at U of T's medical school, where 70 percent of the incoming class are women and 30 percent are men. Now, someone might say, “What the hell is she talking about? It's taken us forever to get women into medical school. Why is this an issue?” It's not an issue that we have the number of women in medical school that we have, but it is an issue that the gap between men and women who are admitted to medical school is growing every year and that the trends are moving in the wrong direction. It's true in law school, it's true in medical school, and it's true in graduate school.

In the province of Ontario, more than 35 percent of the men who are enrolled in any degree program do not complete their degree in 10 years. It's 20 percent for

feel humiliated. They go to a bar. They meet with their buddies—if they have buddies, because men have many fewer friends than women in their 20s. And if unemployment goes on for a year or two, what happens? They can get angry.

At the very tip of the spectrum, way out at the end, we are seeing over and over and over, angry young men who feel that the political and economic systems are rigged against them. That's one of the reasons why this matters. It explains a big chunk of the vote for populist parties and politicians, like Donald Trump. In Kathmandu, Nepal, a group called Gen Z—that was the name of the protest movement of 35-year-olds and younger—overthrew the government and burned the city to the ground.

There is increasing support for the politics of anger. We're seeing it in the United



Dr. Janice Stein at the Minerva Summit

States. It's here too. It's in France, where Marine Le Pen had 40 percent of the vote. It's in the United Kingdom, where there is growing support for Nigel Farage. It's in Germany, where the Alternative für Deutschland party has about 25 percent support. It's in Japan, where a right-wing populist party headed by a 35-year-old who sounds a lot like the angry 35-year-olds I listen to, won 20 percent of the seats in the upper house. Angry young men tie all of these stories together. In some societies, including Canada, this group goes from 35 up to almost 50. They feel angered by the fact that the system is failing them and is, in many cases, failing their sons as well.

And that should matter to every woman. Why is this a women's issue? Well, first of all, I'm the mother of two boys; it matters to mothers who have sons. It matters to sisters who have brothers. It matters to women who are partnered with men, or who have daughters who hope to be partnered with men someday. Angry, disenchanted, disillusioned men can touch your life in any one of those many ways, but they also touch our communities.

We do not—contrary to what you may hear—have this problem now because women have taken men's jobs or their seats in medical school. Women have not displaced men. There's no evidence to support that. It may feel like that to some, but that's not what's happening. Rather, a stronger explanation is that the pool of applicants who

are male is shrinking.

So why now? The first reason is one I've already covered: Schools are not designed for boys. Under 20 percent of all elementary school teachers are men. I remember teaching a class at the University of Toronto when I was pregnant with my second son. As it became obvious that I was pregnant, I was swarmed by women students who I thought wanted to ask me a question about global politics, but they actually wanted to talk about the fact that I was pregnant and working. How was I managing to do that? How was I going to have a family and continue to work? That's why we have role models. Role models matter. You see yourself. Many boys are going through elementary school without ever having a male teacher, then get into high school and often don't have male teachers there either. It is not healthy to have no male role models.

There is also not enough physical activity. Women would also benefit from more physical activity in school. Physical activity is important for mental function and for mental health. We have to change the way we organize a school day. I don't want to be cooped up from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. with only a 45-minute break, not being able to move around. But that's what we do. And there is not enough active learning by doing. There are different ways to teach, but we're locked into a factory model of teaching, a 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial model of education, which was really great in the

early 1900s and 1920s. It was state-of-the-art then. In 2025, that fundamental model has not really changed. And boys have the toughest time with that outdated model.

The third vector feeding into this challenge is "gamer culture." Video games have become an increasingly important part of children's lives. We're seeing a generation of kids for whom screens and video games are innate in a way that they haven't been for earlier generations. For boys, there is an especially intense preoccupation with video gaming. I was not one bit surprised to find that the young man who is accused of assassinating Charlie Kirk was part of a gamer culture and was deeply, deeply into video games. That is a common pattern that we see.

Finally, the worst victims of violent, angry men are women. And that's why this is a women's issue. When I started my academic career, I was the only woman who worked in my field—the only woman in this country who worked in my field, which is the study of war. Fifty years ago, this was neither an accepted nor a conventional area of study for a woman. Who made it possible for me to have a career? Men. Men took it on in the earliest stages and opened the first doors for women, or we would not have senior women in the positions that they are in this country. Now it's our turn. It's women's turn to take this on for boys and see what we can do.

What can be done? There are two or

three really important things that we are seeing now. Gavin Newsom in California, Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan, and Spencer Cox in Utah are three governors who have all invested effort, time, and money in developing educational programs for boys, breaking with this 19<sup>th</sup> century factory model and beginning to develop much more creative, open, and active physical spaces for younger boys to go to school where they can feel good about themselves and have a positive attitude toward school.

The second thing we know is that boys and men have many fewer friends than women. Social scientist Robert Putnam wrote a wonderful book, *Bowling Alone*, in which he talked about the lack of social capital—a fancy phrase for social networks—that we have and draw on in times of adversity. He’s partnered with Richard Reeves, who has been writing about boyhood and manhood for the last 10 years, and in the research that they’re doing, they find that adolescent boys and men in this age group have very weak social networks and feel lonely. Now, think about that. Who is vulnerable to online recruiting? If you’re spending a lot of time by yourself, in virtual reality, and you feel lonely or you maybe have one friend, you’re a prime target for online recruiting. Recruiting into what? In many cases, a violent culture.

There’s good research here, too, that has been done. I’m not drawing an analogy, I’m just sharing some evidence with you: We know from research that many young men in the 1930s felt the same way. They felt they had no economic prospects in Germany because there was terrible, terrible inflation and depression. Their traditional social networks were entirely disrupted by the war, and there were few supportive networks to get them through this difficult period. A militia becomes attractive because it offers friendship and companionship. That is worrying in our day and age.

So, what do we need to do? We need to help create social organizations that engage

boys. We need mentors—women need mentors and so do boys and young men. Frankly, they need male mentors who are active in their society, who are contributing, and who are convinced that there’s opportunity and that our societies can meet the challenge. They need it in the same way that women do.

A well-known writer, John McKnight, looked at this set of issues. He went to a

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largely Black neighbourhood in Chicago where there was a very high crime rate; his group included social workers and a paramedic. They met with the kids in the neighbourhood to discuss what would help. These kids said, “We need a basketball court where we can go after school so that we have another option other than hanging out on the streets.” The challenge was then to build the basketball court. There was an older man with only one leg, a carpenter,

from the community who had joined the group who wanted to contribute and help build the basketball court. When he put up his hand and said, “I’ll help,” a social worker said, “Okay, great. But you know what? We’ll get you into a rehab hospital. We’ll fit you with a prosthetic leg. And when you’re out, you can come back and build a basketball court with these boys.” That’s an example of the medicalization of solutions. McKnight then turned to this man and said, “What do you need to build this basketball court?” He said, “A little bit of help with the turf, a hammer, some nails, and time with these boys.” These two people saw it so differently. The social worker and the professionals saw the deficit; McKnight saw the assets. We need to see the assets and we need to support and help the people who see the strengths rather than those who focus on the deficiencies.

Finally, and I really believe this matters: Teach boys about girls. Girls are not the problem. Boys have challenges that are, to a significant degree, the result of the way our systems are structured, but when they are looking for someone to blame, women are directly in their line of sight. That is misdirected. Boys need to understand that girls are their friends—not their adversaries. The only way we can change that is if we bring boys in, we treat them with respect and dignity, we change our institutions so that boys can be as comfortable in school as girls, and we enable the conversation between boys and girls, which is essential in any healthy society.

People ask me this all the time: What’s the biggest threat to global security? They expect me to say AI—not true—or autonomous nuclear weapons, which is more serious. There’s the epidemic of horrific violence that we’re seeing around the world that is deeply worrying. But what is the biggest threat to global security that we face today? It’s angry, disillusioned, hopeless, young men who see no future for themselves. And that’s on all of us to fix. **M**

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