

Gender Bias Is Alive and Well and Affecting Our Children

by: Karen Zittleman, PhD, and David Sadker, PhD

"I heard that girls are doing fine now, really better than the boys. Is sexism really still a problem?"

Many teachers, parents, and students are confused about gender equity in schools. They are not alone. We recently received a call from a young reporter who wanted to speak about our work "in making women superior to men." The reporter viewed gender bias in school as males versus females. We do not. Gender bias short-circuits both boys and girls, and *both* move forward when gender restrictions are removed.

In the past decades, we have seen great progress in battling gender bias and discrimination. Females comprise more than 40 percent of high school athletes; enroll in biology, chemistry, and precalculus courses at rates equal to or greater than males; and have access to virtually all colleges. Boys are making impressive progress as well. More boys are scoring higher on standardized tests, taking advanced placement exams, graduate from high school, and go on to college. (It should be noted, however, that for poor and minority boys and girls, the situation is far less encouraging.)

So is gender bias a relic of a bygone era? Hardly.

Girls in school and society

Consider the following:

Girls and schools. Gender socialization teaches girls to please others, and working hard at school is part of that. Teachers appreciate students who follow directions and do not cause problems, and this is part of the reason girls receive better report-card grades than boys. But these higher grades carry a large, hidden cost as docile and compliant children may grow into adults with lower self-esteem and less independence. In fact, even today, more than one-third of students in 3rd–12th grades report "people think that the most important thing for girls is to get married and have children."



Test scores. In the early years, girls are ahead of or equal to boys on most standardized measures of achievement. By the time they graduate from high school or college, girls have fallen behind boys on all the key exams needed to gain entrance to and scholarships for the most prestigious colleges and graduate schools, including the SAT, ACT, MCAT, LSAT, and GRE.

Instruction. Perhaps one reason why female test scores tumble is that from elementary school through higher education, studies show that female students receive less active classroom instruction, both in the quantity and quality. Girls' grades may be less a sign of academic gifts than a reward for following the rules, being quiet, and conforming to school norms.

Curricular bias. No matter the subject, the names and experiences of males continue to dominate the pages of school books. Current elementary and high school social studies texts include five times more males than females; elementary reading books and award-winning Caldecott and Newbery children's books include twice as many males.

Math and science enrollment. Female enrollment in most high school and college math and science courses has increased dramatically. Girls are in the majority in biology, chemistry, algebra, and precalculus courses. Unfortunately, the connection between girls and science and math remains tenuous. A survey by the Society of Women Engineers found that 75 percent of American girls have no interest in pursuing a career in science, math, or technology. Why? They perceive these subjects as cold, impersonal, and with little clear application to their lives or to society.

Parental perceptions. Researchers at the University of Michigan followed more than 800 children and their parents for 13 years (1994-2007), and found that traditional gender stereotypes greatly influence parental attitudes and behaviors related to children's success in math. Parents buy more math and science toys, and spend more time on these activities with their sons. Simply put, parents expect their sons to do well in math, and not surprisingly, over time, girls get the message, and their interest in math decreases.

Sexual harassment. You may be surprised to learn that boys are the targets of sexual harassment almost as frequently as girls: nearly four out of five students of both genders in grades 8 through 11 report they have been harassed. Nine in 10 students (85 percent) report that students sexually harass other students at their school, and almost 40 percent of students report that school employees sexually harass as well. The most common sexual harassment against boys takes the form of "gay-bashing" or questioning their sexuality, while girls experience verbal and physical harassment, including unwanted touching.

Athletics. Male high school athletes outnumber female athletes by more than 1 million, and male athletic participation is now growing at twice the rate of that of females. Although girls comprise 49 percent of the students in the nation's high schools, they receive only 41 percent of the opportunities to play sports. Girls' teams typically have less visibility and status than male teams and are often denied the same benefits, like adequate facilities and financial support.

College and careers. Men had been the majority of college students from the colonial period to the early 1980s. Today, women are the majority, especially at two-year colleges. Put into perspective, there is a higher percentage of both women and men attending all college today than ever before. However, what is often missed in these attendance figures is that many college majors and careers are hyper-segregated. Teaching, social work, and nursing are overwhelmingly female. Engineering, computer science, and physics are overwhelmingly

male.

From girls to women

Although women are the majority of U.S. paid workers, they are still discriminated against in wages, benefits, pensions, and social security. Workers still do not have paid family medical leave guaranteed nationwide (although numerous countries do) and very limited publicly funded child care. In fact, half of all women employees do not have one paid sick day. According to the National Women's Law Center report, *Falling Short in Every State: The Wage Gap and Harsh Economic Realities for Women Persist*, (April 2009), women who work full time and year round earn on the average 78 cents for every dollar men earn. For Asian American women, the figure is 87 cents; for African American women, 62 cents; and for Latinas, 53 cents.

Women comprise almost half of the associates at law firms, but are less than 20 percent of the partners. Women are an underwhelming 20 percent of our leading journalists. Men comprise about 97 percent of the top executives at Fortune 500 companies. Female representation in the U.S. House of Representatives ranks a disheartening 69th in the world, behind Iraq and North Korea.

Help all children reach their potential

If we want males and females to value fairness and justice for others, and reach their potential whatever choices they want to make, we must create schools in which they experience justice—in their classes, relationships, school experiences, and outcomes. Here are a few activities to help parents and teachers uncover the hidden messages they send and start working toward gender equality in schools and at home:

1. *If These Walls Could Speak*—Walk down the hallway of your child's school. Look at the displays, exhibits, photographs, athletic trophies, and other awards. What gender lessons are being taught to the students who travel those halls?
2. *Famous Men and Women*—Ask your child to list famous men and women from history, excluding the wives of presidents. Do their lists indicate more women or men? Does the list include individuals of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds? What does it mean when children see one gender as movers and shakers, and the other gender as spectators? Discuss with them what might be done to learn more about those missing pages of American history.
3. *Honor the Unique Gifts of All Children*—Parents and teachers who focus on human qualities, on how children treat one another, on how the world can become a better place, on opening all careers to everyone are saying that each child is unique and accepted. When boys and girls hear the other sex described in terms of their human and individual strengths instead of a stereotypical gender yardstick, they learn important lessons that can help undo gender stereotyping.
4. *Check Out Title IX*: You are not alone. The weight of the law is on your side. Title IX protects girls and boys, teachers, and staff, from gender bias in schools. Visit <http://www.titleix.info/> for information, activities, and suggestions.

Note: This article is adapted from material in *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in Schools and What We Can Do About It* by David and Myra Sadker and Karen Zittleman (Scribner, 2009)

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