

To The Committee Secretary
Inquiry into the Education of Boys,

I would like the following submission considered for acceptance:

I am a high school teacher in a large rural high school in NSW. I am a strong advocate of boys' education in both classroom practice and the education of parents and colleagues. I frequently see boys struggling at school in all aspects – educationally; socially and emotionally

The demise of boys in school, especially in terms of literacy but basically across all areas, is not surprising. It is a product of what is happening in a broader society with schools being microcosms. This does not mean that males are disadvantaged in society for, after years of women struggling against stereotypical attitudes, still the gender balance leans towards men. However, 15 years of the promotion of girls in schools has seen boys become comparatively disadvantaged in schools. The discrepancy between the traditional societal success of men and the current scholastic failure of boys makes it difficult for many to accept that a problem even exists. Just as society is struggling with gender equity, so to are schools, who after years of explicit policies for the education of girls turn around and wonder why girls are outperforming boys. If they had not been, surely we would have been shocked that all our efforts had failed.

The lagging educational outcomes of boys are a symptom of a much greater malaise. A valid inquiry needs to have a wide scope of reference for while there may be the desire to point the finger at schools, it must be remembered that schools are driven by political; social and cultural agendas. This is clearly seen in the politically correct gender-based policies of the NSW DEET, who have swung from a Girl's Education Policy to a Gender Equity Policy. However, this is not a suitable policy for boys. It still contains documentation promoting what may be considered traditionally male occupations to females but does not even address the effect of narrow subject choice on boy's occupational outcomes. The much needed NSW Government Advisory Committee Report on Boys' Education (1994) clearly showed a need for a separate, but linked, Boys' Education Policy rather than the ideas of gender equity.

NSW high schools of over a 1000 students are entitled to the position Head Teacher Welfare Girls. In my school, as in many others, this person takes the role of Head Teacher Welfare and heads a team who play a direct role in the welfare of students regardless of gender. However, the position alone reveals a clearly biased political agenda with a position being created directly for the welfare of girls. Who holds the position that concerns itself with the welfare of boys? Boys who we now realise are poorer communicators than girls; often consider violence a valid form of conflict resolution; must conform to a narrow playground male stereotype enveloped in homophobic attitudes and behaviours; and when these are combined with the societal expectation of male success and inherent power - internal and external conflict are unavoidable. Conflict that can quickly degenerate into the solace of drug dependence or the escape of suicide.

The recently achieved first position in the number of total male suicides per capita of first world countries is symptomatic of the same malaise. This was not attained by an increase in male youth suicide but rather an increase in middle age men taking their own lives. This “mid-life” crisis is across all levels of society from the generationally unemployed to the rooms of parliament. Not only are more males killing themselves than murdering each other but the ratio of attempts to completions for both males & females paints an interesting picture with 5 attempts for each completion for males and 30 attempts for females. However, the idea that males choose more violent and hence successful methods is a myth. The basic reason males are more successful is because they want to do it – it is an escape not an indicator that help is required. What is wrong with our society when two separate and indeed different generation of men are killing themselves?

Men’s health is again symptomatic of the gender illness. Men lead the major causes of death, at all ages, for all diseases excluding gender specific and urinogenital in 25 to 40 year olds. They are more likely to be overweight; will die earlier on average; have twice the chance of heart attack; represent 98% of AIDS sufferers; and have a greater chance of contracting prostate cancer than women contracting breast cancer. Juxtaposed to this, they use health services dramatically less than females happier with a “she’ll be right” attitude. However, the promotion of male health in the media is far below that for female health.

Our society has a culture of male expendability which is currently becoming one talking of redundancy. Societally, we still consider the honourable idea of women and children first as valid regardless of the lack of equity. This expendability, especially in Australian culture, manifests itself into the concept of sending boys to war (death) as an appropriate method for developing boys into men and the values instilled by the experience are strongly celebrated in monuments and parades. The technologies of cloning will not see the disappearance of men but it does place the idea into the collective psyche, yet again creating a negative attitude that men is not necessary. This societal expectation of sacrifice is strange against the dominant role of provider expected of men in our society.

The societal expectation of the male taking the role as primary provider creates a strong link between the labour market and male welfare. The traditional life-time job which provides family security and prosperity is now limited in a more casualised and dynamic market. The gap between welfare and the lowest wages has closed possibly resulting in a drop in the male participation rate with those made redundant or unemployed less likely to return to the workforce. This is occurring while Australia has a greater percentage of males working more than 45 hours a week than both the US and Japan coupled with an increasing average retirement age for men close to 60. Hence, the problem here is two-edged but often the results are the same. Societal pressure to be a provider creates great angst amongst the young unemployed or the older redundant with the links between lack of occupational success and poor male health and suicide clear. On the other side, we have men bound to the need to be successful often sacrificing valuable family time to provide for the family. Many single parent families consist of married couples, just with a father in absentia. This is a dangerous societal stereotyping of boys and men.

In last third of this century, feminism has rightfully demanded that girls and woman be freed from the stereotypical straight-jacket of narrow gender roles. Girls have been told that they

can be anything and do anything they wish. Millions of dollars have been put into programs based on the premise of imbalance that men earn more and hence hold more positions of power in a wide range of fields. Feminism has helped us become aware of the price of our daughters initially becoming sex objects and then being obligated to a role of carer. Society has strived to open new possibilities for them entering the era of "multi-option woman" where it is valid to have a career but it is also valid to be supported by a male. The question is when are we going to free our sons from the stereotypical straight-jacket they are forced to wear? Young men are trapped in a new era of "no-option man" where males must still be success objects. This is seeing the creation of a fringe society of men, of all ages, who have no job and no status and hence are not marriage material to today's woman. The same diversity of societal outcomes that are encouraged in females are expected from males. However, we still believe that boys will become good men alone regardless of the dramatic change in today's society.

The media plays a devastating role with its mostly negative projection of men. Many boys spend more time watching television than with their fathers. The concept of television being a provider of male role models for the men of tomorrow is terrifying. The models of masculinity displayed on television are either ultra-competitive sportsmen, violent men or dopes - not much to choose from. The push for female equality has made us consider the media projection of women carefully with many inferior roles now being filled by men. When this is coupled with the casting of women in a wide range of occupations and societal roles versus the often presented breadwinning father or single predatory male - the image projected to both boys and girls is very clear.

Boys learn how to be men by example but what is an appropriate example. The media has already been discussed as unsuitable so who do we turn to show the way. Young men spend much more time with males of similar ages than with adult men. We deliberately segregate children into similar age cohorts. In peer groups it's the most aggressive and/or violent male who calls the shots and ends up providing the example of "successful" masculinity. For boys largely surrounded by women, at school and home, it becomes straightforward to interpret masculine as "not-female". This leaves a very limited range of behaviours that come to be accepted as male and the anti-female attitudes that are likely to develop. Boys need to be "fathered" for want of a better word. Even the word has suffered at society's hands. "Mothering" implies caring and nurturing as a life long process. Fathering is something that takes a couple of minutes. However, it is the crucial issue for boys and the men they become and it does not have to be done by fathers. It should involve fathers, grandfathers, uncles and male friends - any male who can set an example and be a positive role model.

There is no quick fix to this sickness and even dealing with the symptoms will be a slow and painful process. The key to future improvement is not just the education of today's boys but also the education of today's parents. We need to firstly educate society to show boys that they are valued and important both today and then in the future. When this has been established then we can concern ourselves with what we teach them at school. An education that must extend far beyond literacy and numeracy to that of social life skills.