

BOYS AND YOUNG MEN ARE FALLING BEHIND WOMEN

by Rafael Mendez

Over the last several decades, women have made significant gains in education and the workplace. More women are graduating from college, entering professional careers, and earning competitive wages. This progress is important and worth celebrating. At the same time, there is another side to this story that receives far less attention: what is happening to boys and young men.

Since the 1950s, the social roles available to girls and women have expanded dramatically. Today, girls grow up knowing they can pursue nearly any career or life path they choose. Women's roles have evolved, and social institutions increasingly support their development. In contrast, men's roles have changed very little. Many young men struggle to find clear direction, purpose, or identity, and as a result, they are falling behind in education, work, and social engagement.

From both psychological and sociological perspectives, these struggles are not the result of a lack of ability. Rather, they reflect a mismatch between boys' developmental needs and the social systems meant to support them. Schools, families, and the labor market have changed rapidly, yet many boys have been left without clear guidance. Understanding this mismatch helps explain broader social issues related to mental health, employment, and social disconnection.

A key issue is identity development. Boys who struggle in school and later in the workforce often fail to develop a strong sense of competence or purpose. Without positive feedback from major institutions, many disengage emotionally and socially. Over time, this disengagement can lead to low self-esteem, depression, and withdrawal. These mental health challenges are not isolated problems but the result of long-term exclusion and a lack of meaningful social roles.

Psychological research shows that boys and girls develop at different rates, especially in early childhood. Boys generally take longer to develop language skills and self-control, yet schools tend to reward early verbal ability, sitting still, and rule-following. From the start, many boys feel out of place or "behind" in the classroom. Because boys' brains develop executive functioning and impulse control later, they are more likely to be labeled as disruptive or underachieving. This repeated negative labeling damages motivation and self-belief, reinforcing a cycle of academic failure.

Over time, repeated struggles erode confidence. When students are frequently corrected or punished, they begin to see themselves as "bad at school." Motivation declines, effort decreases, and disengagement grows. Schools are powerful institutions that shape how children understand success. When boys feel they do not fit the model of a successful student, many stop trying rather than pushing forward.

As boys move into early adulthood, the gap becomes even more visible. Women are far more likely than men to enroll in and complete college. This matters because college degrees have become the primary gateway to stable employment and higher wages. The effects of this gap extend beyond income. Declining marriage rates, father absence, job instability, and digital isolation all reflect a society that no longer provides clear adult roles for men. Masculinity has

become uncertain or culturally contested, leaving many young men without clear scripts for adulthood.

Social expectations have not kept pace with these educational and economic changes. Boys need new, socially valued roles and policies that help them transition into a technological and more gender-equal society. For many young men, especially those from working-class backgrounds, college feels expensive, risky, or simply not meant for them. Choosing not to attend college can affect identity and social perception, particularly in romantic relationships.

Economic shifts have intensified these challenges. In the past, men without college degrees could still find stable, well-paying jobs in manufacturing or skilled trades. Many of those opportunities have disappeared. As a result, some young men cycle between low-wage jobs or leave the workforce entirely. Among younger workers today, women often earn as much as or more than men—not because women are taking opportunities away, but because they are better positioned educationally. This shift has also changed relationship dynamics, as women are no longer financially dependent on men, challenging traditional expectations about masculinity and partnership.

Work has long been tied to self-worth for men. When stable employment is difficult to achieve, many experience stress, frustration, and feelings of failure. Traditional ideas of masculinity that emphasize being a provider become harder to maintain, leaving some men unsure of their place in family and society.

Family life also plays an important role in this broader shift. Many boys grow up without consistent male role models, particularly fathers. While this does not guarantee negative outcomes, it can make it harder for boys to learn emotional regulation, responsibility, and what successful adulthood looks like. Masculinity is shaped by culture rather than biology, and when traditional roles no longer fit today's economy, boys are often left without clear alternatives.

The emotional cost of falling behind is serious. Young men experience higher rates of substance use, risk-taking, and suicide than young women. They are also more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. These outcomes are not simply the result of poor individual choices, but of prolonged disconnection from education, work, and community.

Finally, the rise of digital culture has reshaped how many young men cope with failure and isolation. Online spaces can offer distraction and belonging, but when they replace real-world goals and relationships, they can deepen disengagement. Digital communities may provide temporary comfort while making re-engagement with offline life more difficult.

The struggles of young men are not in competition with women's success. Both realities can exist at the same time. The problem is not that boys are failing individually, but that many of the structures guiding them into adulthood no longer work as intended. Supporting boys does not mean returning to the past; it means creating schools, workplaces, and social supports that recognize developmental differences and provide meaningful pathways forward. When young men are supported, families are stronger, communities are healthier, and society as a whole is more stable.