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**What Feminists Can Do for Boys**

We fought for young women in the patriarchy first. But budding patriarchs could use some help too.

**By Jessica Valenti**

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One of the many political ironies of our time is that feminism’s most powerful cultural moment has coincided with the rise of extreme misogyny. While women protest, run for office and embrace the movement for gender equality in record numbers, a generation of young, mostly white men are being radicalized into believing that their problems stem from women’s progress.

Whether it’s [misogynist terrorism](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/opinion/when-misogynists-become-terrorists.html), the rash of young men feeling sexually entitled to women or the persistent stereotype of “real men” as powerful and violent, it’s never been clearer that American boys are in desperate need of intervention.

Though feminists have always recognized the anguish that boys face in a patriarchal system, we haven’t built the same structures of support for boys that we have for girls. If we want to stop young men from being taken in by sexism, that has to change.

One of feminism’s biggest successes was creating an alternative culture for girls and women seeking respite from mainstream constraints. Girls worried about unrealistic beauty standards, for example, can turn to the body positivity movement. Those of us who find traditional media’s treatment of women unappealing can read feminist blogs and magazines; female college students who have critical questions about how gender shapes their lives can take women’s studies classes.

From social media campaigns to after-school equality clubs, feminism has birthed dozens of online and real-life spaces where girls can find alternatives to the sexist status quo.

But boys and young men who are struggling have no equivalent culture. As [Sarah Rich recently wrote in](https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/06/imagining-a-better-boyhood/562232/)The Atlantic, “While society is chipping away at giving girls broader access to life’s possibilities, it isn’t presenting boys with a full continuum of how they can be in the world.”

This gap has made boys susceptible to misogynist hucksters peddling get-manly-quick platitudes and dangerous online extremist communities.

In the last year, for example, we’ve seen young Americans flock to the work of Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychology professor and YouTube philosopher who’s made his name [refusing to call students by their preferred pronouns](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37875695) and suggesting that [men are in charge because they’re just better suited for it](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/style/jordan-peterson-12-rules-for-life.html).

Some of Mr. Peterson’s other claims include the idea that sexual harassment wouldn’t be such a problem [if women didn’t wear makeup to work](https://t.co/x0CyEPFWSF) and that “enforced monogamy” would stop young men from committing mass murder. (He is notably silent on [how women might fare](https://www.vox.com/conversations/2018/6/6/17409144/jordan-peterson-12-rules-for-life-feminism-philosophy)being partnered to someone with a propensity for horrific violence.)

Online misogynist communities offer similarly dangerous advice to young men distressed over sexual rejection. Instead of teaching them that their value has nothing to do with their sexual experience — or that they are simply not entitled to sexual attention no matter how badly they want it — “incel” forums tell boys that the real problem is women’s freedom. If women didn’t have a choice, they say, then any man could have sex with whomever he liked.

Boys and young men are not seeking these spaces out because they inherently hate women or think they are inferior. They seek them out because they are desperate for community and answers in a confusing time of their lives. Consider Jack Peterson, [a young man profiled by](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/unmaking-of-an-incel_us_5b11a9aee4b0d5e89e1fb519)HuffPost this year. He explained how he found incel forums and decided he must be one too because he was also lonely and hadn’t had sex yet. He was 17 years old.

Feminist ideas can help men — be it the rejection of expectations that men be strong and stoic or ending the silence around male victims of sexual violence. But boys also need the same kind of culture we created for girls.

There is an understandable feminist skepticism of claims that the culture is failing boys. White male leaders in government, corporations and institutions vastly outnumber women. Men have more cultural and economic power than women. And more often than not, assertions that young men are under siege are more about reinforcing traditional gender power dynamics than helping to see how those norms harm boys.

Feminism has long focused on issues of sexual assault, reproductive rights, harassment and more. But issues don’t hurt women, men do. Until we grapple with how to stop misogynists themselves — starting with ensuring boys don’t grow up to be one — women will never be free.

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