The nation's schools are failing boys

By MAGGIE GALLAGHER

The headline from The Washington Post celebrates yet another milestone: "University of Virginia president." Meantime, the data continues to mount that our educational system is massively failing boys.

In a new book, "Why Boys Fail," Richard Whitmire points to a study that tracked every graduate of every high school in 2007. For every 167 women in a four-year college, there were only 100 men. Gender is a powerful predictor of college attendance: Black women were 5 percentage points more likely than white women to go to college.

And it's not just Boston: Nearly 60 percent of all bachelor's degrees in the country go to women.

Do we care about our boys?

The Economist recently put Rosie the Riveter on its cover to celebrate a major milestone: Women are now as common as men in the US workforce. Why? Massively greater numbers of men than women are losing their jobs in the last decade.

Yet every sign that boys or men are hurting gets turned around into a "happy news" story of female success.

The disconnect between the happy headlines and the reality underneath will only be solved by recognizing that boys are failing because they cannot defend themselves or organize around their own systemic, gendered problems. Gender in the position of "the weaker sex" unmans them -- and also makes them deeply unattainable to women.

So the only way we are going to identify the new problem and do something about it, is if women recognize that this is our problem, and not just boys' problem.

We have sons as well as daughters, nephews as well as nieces. We want husbands and fathers who are confident, successful males and good family men willing and able to work hard for their families.

The problem is not that women are doing well, it's that boys are doing badly. The two genders are in competition with one another without all of us losing.

A new report by the Pew Research Center finds that more younger women are marrying down. More women aged 30- to 44-years-old have more education than their husbands, compared to 19 percent of husbands educated than their wives.

One in four wives now substantially outearns her husband.

It turns out women are not necessarily happy about male failure. Betsy Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness," notes that "By many objective measures the lives of women in the United States have improved over the past 35 years, yet we show that measures of subjective well-being happiness has declined both absolutely and relative to men."

When men fail, fewer women get married. Since 1970, the proportion of 30- to 44-year-olds who are married fell from 84 percent to 60 percent.
What's next? Ask black women. In 1970, black wives were already more educated than their husbands, and a higher percent of black people aged 30 to 44 then were married. By 2007, that figure had plunged to 52 percent. Fewer than one out of three black Americans in prime marrying/childbearing years is now married, and it is not surprising why out-of-wedlock birthrates are so high.

An education system failing a generation of boys is going to produce unprecedented human problems for women and for the men themselves. Are we women enough to do something about it?