

July 15, 2006

The Complaint Gap

By JOHN TIERNEY

The 1992 report was titled "How Schools Shortchange Girls," and it set off a national outcry. In response to women's pleas, Congress passed "gender equity" legislation declaring girls an "underserved" group and providing money to deal with the crisis.

Last Sunday, The Times published an article by Tamar Lewin exhaustively chronicling how men are lagging behind women in college. The article provoked an outcry too -- but not from men. For every letter from a man, The Times got 10 letters from women, most of them still worried about females being shortchanged.

It could be argued -- I can already anticipate the deluge of letters from one sex -- that men are blasé because they have so many other advantages, and that women are worrying because they still face so many kinds of discrimination. Maybe. But to me it looks more like another type of gender divide: the Complaint Gap.

That 1992 report looks ridiculous in retrospect, now that those supposedly shortchanged women outnumber men at college by a nearly 3-to-2 ratio, with a notably sharp disparity among lower-income students. But even at the time of the report, women had already been a majority on campus for more than a decade.

The report was issued with a warning that "gender bias in our schools" is "compromising our country," but at the time girls were doing better than boys by most measures. On standardized tests, they were a little behind in math but farther ahead in reading. They took more advanced-placement exams and were less likely to be held back a year or to drop out of school.

The idea of widespread bias against girls was especially ludicrous considering that most teachers in grade school and high school were women, and that the girls got higher grades than boys. It was like publishing a wake-up call titled, "How the Vatican Shortchanges Italian Clergy."

The research was later debunked by scholars like Judith Kleinfeld and Christina Hoff Sommers, but not before the shortchanged girl became a cause célèbre. The report's sponsor, the American Association of University Women, masterfully publicized the report as well as a national survey of girls and boys.

The survey purported to show a catastrophic loss of confidence by girls as they went through school. They ranked lower than boys on a "self-esteem index." Boys were more likely than girls to say, "I'm happy the way I am" and "I'm good at a lot of things."

But why assume that this gender gap was caused by school? It merely showed that girls and boys responded differently. The girls were doing better in school but were more inclined to worry about problems. The boys were either too oblivious to see their failings or didn't want to admit them, like the men on college campuses who contentedly play "Halo" instead of going to class.

This is the same gender gap that appeared in the letters this week: concerned women, oblivious men. It's the gap observed by marriage counselors, who notice that wives are far better at spotting problems and articulating them. In his observations of couples, the psychologist John Gottman finds that more than 80 percent of the time it's the wife who brings up the tough marital issues, while the husband prefers to avoid talking about them.

Men's reticence may be due to cultural conditioning that makes them reluctant to show weakness. It's also probably due to their brains, which don't process emotions as deftly as women's do. To avoid getting swamped by fear or rage, men shut down negative emotions. If we don't talk about it, it's not a problem: What, me complain?

To women, the men are in denial. To men, the women are complaining about trivia. But each sex's strategy makes sense for each sex. The problem comes when you set public policy based on who's complaining the loudest. The gender-equity programs established in the 1990's, besides perpetuating a

bogus crisis, mainly served the cause of girls who didn't need it.

I'm not hoping to see men and boys lobbying for their own gender-equity boondoggles, because a lot of them don't need special help either. The students in most trouble are poor African-Americans and Latinos -- especially the boys, but also the girls. They'll never have an easy time making their complaints heard. But it would be a start if we all stopped pretending that middle-class girls were the ones being shortchanged.

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