

# The girls are doing great NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT THE BOYS



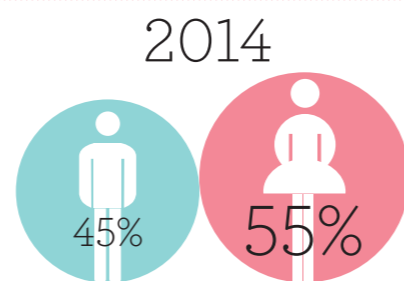
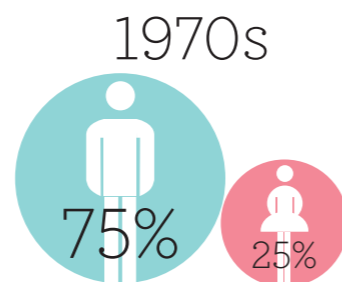
The fight for equality for women is far from over, but at last girls are outperforming boys at every level of education and taking over previously male-dominated professions like law. They are also growing up expecting partners to share household chores and be hands-on dads. But where does this leave young men? Writer **Janice Turner** reveals the effect it is having on her teenage sons

*'I hope my sons will relish a world in which girls stand beside them, equal partners in work and love'*

**T**he other night we were watching *In The Line Of Fire* when grizzled FBI agent Clint Eastwood makes a pass at Rene Russo and is rebuffed. But as she leaves by a hotel lift, Clint rushes in and grapples her into a passionate kiss. Rene, of course, melts with desire.

'What?' cried my 18-year-old son in genuine confusion. 'But she just said NO!' Sometimes I feel sorry for my teenage boys. Raised by a feminist mother, they now have a Feminist Society at school, set up by their female classmates. My elder son attended the inaugural meeting. 'It was against rape,' he said scathingly. 'Like anyone is pro-rape.'

## GENDER SPLIT: UNI STUDENTS



When we watched *Pretty Woman* he was astounded that anyone could make a movie about Richard Gere paying Julia Roberts to have sex. 'It's appalling – how can that possibly be a rom-com?'

His brother, 16, is incensed by the mere mention of feminism. 'Obviously women aren't equal in other countries,' he says. 'But in Britain there is nothing left to campaign about.' Violence against women? 'But everyone knows that is bad.' Only one in five MPs are female? 'But



Race for equality: are boys getting left behind?

women can stand if they want to: no one is stopping them.'

To my sons, surrounded by clever, über-confident, high-achieving girls, gender inequality does not exist. When I was their age, women were just prising open the citadel of male professions. Now, in law, medicine and veterinary science, female undergraduates are in the majority. Even in the macho bastion of business school, a third of students are girls.

And while they are getting better A-level grades and taking up 200,000 more university places than boys every year, many girls have acquired a sparky, cool

new brand of feminism. This means, at long last, they are rebelling against a pornified culture that puts so much value on them looking 'hot'. And they are also challenging boys for being sexist, leaving them sometimes hurt, indignant and confused.

Or that is how it looks to me, seeing things as I must from the boy perspective. From the moment your infant son pees a perfect arc of urine into your eye, you enter a world of Otherness. My feminist notions, that gender is an artificial construct, that boys and girls are simply socialised to like different things, were destroyed when I gave my first born, aged three, my old

Tiny Tears doll. He dismembered it.

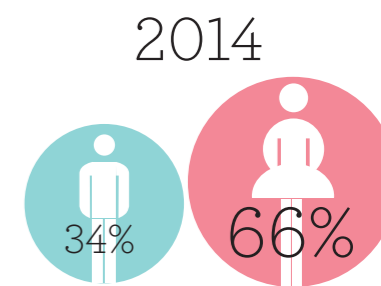
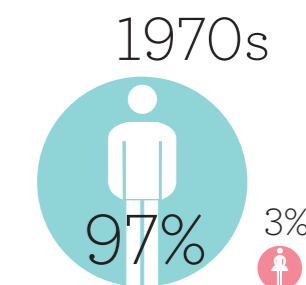
While friends with little girls could spend a quiet afternoon threading beads, my sons could rarely be implored to sit still. They were roaring around, poking sticks into a dead fox, obsessed with bodily functions and fixated by soldiers, Bear Grylls, Ray Mears, sharks, fire engines, diggers, dinosaurs and climbing trees, as if pre-programmed by Boy Central Command.

I am, of course, generalising from my own rowdy man-cubs. There are boisterous girls and sedate boys. And I abhor the recent, regressive division by toy manufacturers, whereby girls' stuff is all vanity mirrors and pretend kitchens while boys get Lego and chemistry sets. But it was clear to me early on that boys are different.

It was a huge relief to read the book *Raising Boys*, by the warm-hearted and progressive Australian child psychologist Steve Biddulph. He advises working with, not fighting against, boys' different bio-chemistry, their stronger bodies powered by that rocket fuel testosterone. Wrestling, he says, calms them down. So every morning they'd burst into our bedroom for a fierce 10-minute tussle. 'Be careful!' I'd cry as my husband lobbed them, yelping, into the air. But they wanted – needed – to play rough.

Yet as my sons grew older, another question burned: how do you turn these masculine creatures into decent men? I

## STUDYING LAW



don't want a weary daughter-in-law berating me in 20 years' time for raising a housework-avoidant son – the ultimate feminist fail. Besides, gender roles are in flux. Parenting is slowly edging towards being an equal endeavour. And the women of my sons' generation won't (I hope) be washing men's socks: they'll be busy running the world.

So I taught my boys to cook: not fripperies like cupcakes but hearty meals. I don't always do their laundry, so they thank me when I do. I refuse to apologise for working: their wives certainly won't. And I don't feel guilty when the fridge is empty – even after one of their friends remarked (jokingly, I hope) that I wasn't 'a proper mother' – his own doesn't work. In not being a selfless domestic drudge, I am equipping them for the future.

Because while feminists like Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook chief operating officer and author of *Lean In*, are preparing young women for greater power at work, we need to

ready our sons for a bigger role at home. I have seen women divorce men who drain their energy, expecting to be coddled like an extra child. And I don't want my sons to be alone.

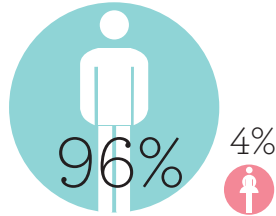
Writers rarely address the vulnerabilities of boys. Boys, for all their bluster, are brittle and it

seems they still don't like talking about their feelings. While some girls turn their pain in on themselves through self-harm and anorexia, boys are more likely to become violent, take drugs or commit crimes, and thus there is less sympathy for the roots of their misery. Young men, it should be remembered, are three times more likely than women to commit suicide.

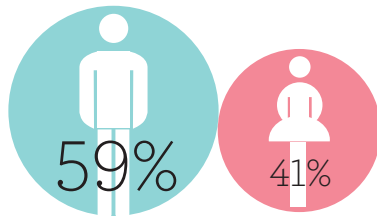
So what are my hopes for my sons? That feminism won't bring down The Patriarchy altogether, at least not before they get jobs. That their generation, who watched online porn before their

## LARGER INCOME: HUSBAND vs WIFE

1970s



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Janice and her sons: 'Boys, for all their bluster, are brittle'

first snog, will understand that it's not the same as real human sex. That a bloke as groovy, witty and insightful as Caitlin Moran will write a best-seller called *How To Be A Man*.

That they will relish a world in which girls stand beside them, equal partners in work and love. That they will combine gentleness and strength, not least because chicks really dig it. That they will always lift the seat before peeing. And that they will know that, when Clint kisses a woman after she says no, it just means relationships are complicated, but rarely like the movies.

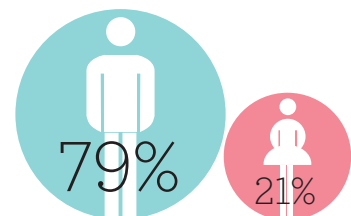
## The new fight for equality

So, how can we help our boys navigate this brave new world? We want them to thrive but we can't undo the progress that we and our mothers made in opening up more choices for young women. Author of *Equality For Men*, Glen Poole, worries that the balance has shifted too far and says parents need to make sure they tell their sons they can achieve anything – whether that's choosing a traditional male role or becoming a stay-at-home dad – just like we tell our daughters.

'The new wave of feminism has been very positive for women and girls, because now they have the opportunity to speak about issues that concern them. But young men and boys don't have the same platform,' he says. 'Boys need to be given the opportunity to define manhood and masculinity on their terms, and to be shown it can be many things. It can be traditional, strong and ambitious – but it can also be soft, caring and vulnerable, or a mix of all these things. I want my daughter to grow up in a world where both boys and girls can flourish and fulfil their potential, whether that is being a stay-at-home parent or prime minister.' □

## GENDER SPLIT OF DOCTORS\*

1970s



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