

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / The Men — and Boys — Are Not Alright

I'm Ezra Klein. This is The Ezra Klein Show.

Men and boys are in bad shape. They're in real bad shape.

That's the argument of Richard Reeves' new book of Boys and Men.

Or maybe I shouldn't say it's the argument.

It's just what the numbers say across a huge range of domains.

Health and education and income and happiness and friendship and on and on.

Reeves is a senior fellow at Brookings where he's been studying inequality and poverty and family policy and gender inequality for years.

And that work has taken him to an unexpected, even uncomfortable place.

When we think about gender inequality, we're usually thinking about women and girls.

And for good reason. Men have been dominant, forcibly dominant, legally dominant in society, functionally forever.

And only in recent decades have enormous barriers been even weakened.

But the progress women have made in that time is remarkable.

Here's one stat, Reeves' offer, that blows my mind a bit.

Title IX, the Big Gender Equity and Education Bill, is passed in 1972.

At that time, there was a 13-point gender gap in bachelor's degrees with men, of course, ahead. 13 points.

That gap has only grown since, to 15 points. But now it's women ahead.

So the gap is bigger now than it was in 1972, but in women's favor.

And obviously, obviously, the problem there is not that women are doing well.

The problem is that in a lot of places, men are doing poorly.

They're falling behind where they have been in the past.

And they're falling behind in ways that are tough on families, ways that are tough on marriages, ways that are tough on children.

And it gets much, much worse when you go down the income ladder.

So I wanted to have Reeves on the show to take a close look at these numbers, to think through some of the objections to them,

and to ask what can and should be done here.

And I went back and forth on saying this next part, because maybe it's just obvious.

But at a meta level, I often think in politics, you face this implicit sense that compassion or concern is zero-sum.

That to care about one group or one issue is to care less about another.

And I just don't believe that.

I actually think there's evidence that's not true, and maybe I can talk about that in Ask Me Anything episode sometime.

But, but compassion, it's not measured out in teaspoons from a cup.

It's quite the opposite.

I think it's much more of a habit, something we get better at, something we have more capacity for, the more we practice it.

As always, my email is refinedshowatnytimes.com

Richard Reeves, welcome to the show.

Thanks, Ezra. I'm really pleased to be here.

So your book opens with the line that I have been worrying about boys and men for 25 years.

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Why 25 years? What are you worried about?

Well, that's a reference to the fact that I've raised three boys, and the oldest is actually just about to turn 26.

And so I've been engaged in the enterprise of fathering boys for that long.

And I have this view that all scholarship is at least partly autobiographical.

I think inevitably we bring some of our own experience into it.

And so I just wanted to put out there immediately that that is one of the reasons why I have a particular interest in boys and men.

I obviously don't have a counterfactual, would I have written the book if I'd had three daughters?

Or would I have written a different book as opposed to having three sons?

But there's no doubt that that personal reason is part of the motivation for the book.

But something you suggest there is that in your long life as a poverty and family policy scholar, 15 years ago, 20 years ago, you might have been worried about your boys, but you weren't as worried about boys.

And something began to ping for you and change that.

What were the early signals that this was a class that needed special consideration now?

Well, it's true that I knew some of the general trends around what was happening to boys and men in various areas.

But I just had a couple of moments where I read a couple of findings or I just, a couple of facts were illuminated in a way that I hadn't really noticed before.

And I kept stumbling across them essentially, and eventually just cumulatively,

I came to see that my work on inequality generally, on family change, even on race equity, just had this missing lens, which was this gendered lens.

And of course, then I'm bringing the conversations from home into the workplace too.

But just a couple of moments where I had just read a paper or I saw a stat and I went, whoa, okay, didn't know that.

And then I would sometimes share it with colleagues and say, did you know this?

Did you know, for example, that college enrollment fell by seven times as much for men as for women in 2020?

That's one example.

And so I just kept feeling like it went from stumbling across these data points to kind of running in them and bruising my shin on them.

And then secondly, the mere fact that these things weren't well known enough was an indication that we weren't having a very good quality conversation about men and boys and masculinity.

I looked around and I said, who's talking about this?

And I didn't really like the answer generally to the question of who's talking about this.

And so that felt like both an opportunity and a responsibility.

I want to raise an obvious objection here, which maybe speaks to that.

Who's talking about it? Why aren't people talking about it?

Which is for most of human history, men have been socially and economically dominant.

We're going to talk a lot about education and college studies,

but men were basically all college graduates for almost the entire time.

There's been such a thing as college.

We've had a couple of decades of just moving in the general direction of equality.

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And as soon as women are head on a couple of measures, not by any means all measures, there's this, oh crap, what about the boys feeling that emerges?

How do you answer that objection when you hear it?

Well, the first thing I do is not only to honor that objection if you like, but to share it.

I mean, it's honestly one of the reasons I think that it's taken me so long to gather the evidence and to some extent muster the courage to address this issue, because I have the same reflex.

Essentially, what we're saying is, okay, so we've had, I don't know, 10,000 years in which the cause of gender equality was just intrinsically synonymous with the cause of women and girls.

And then just like yesterday, women got ahead in a few areas, and suddenly you're freaking out, seriously.

I get that instinct.

I think that's actually a perfectly natural reflex in part because the pace of the change has just been so extraordinary.

The updating our sort of view of the world is very difficult.

It's a bit like the needles on a compass sort of swinging from north to south or something.

It's like, wait, what?

I'm just updating our view of the world as the evidence change is very difficult,

but also just honestly at an emotional level, I totally understand that gut reaction to this sense of like, oh wait,

now you're freaking out about boys and men, like you get three minutes where you're behind and it's a crisis.

I get it, but I don't think it's productive to stay in that emotion.

I think that's an understandable and necessary and honorable emotion,

but then we say, okay, having established that, now let's look at the facts.

And the facts are, there are a bunch of places where boys and men are really struggling now, and maybe it's in all our interest to address them.

Let's work through a couple of them, and I want to begin with education.

Tell me about the male female education gap that is opened in K to 12.

So it depends which measure you use, of course,

but a couple of data points just to ground our conversation are that if we take high school GPA, which is a pretty good measure of all kinds of things, outcomes, it's a very good predictor, what does it look like?

And if you then just rank high school GPA across the distribution,

what you find is that the top-scoring students in terms of GPA, the top-decile, two-thirds of them are girls,

and bottom 10%, two-thirds of them are boys with a roughly linear relationship in between.

So there's a very big gender skew in high school GPA.

There's about a six percentage point gap, rather, in on-time high school graduation.

There's a very big gap in kind of school readiness.

In the typical U.S. school district now, this is work from Sean Reardon and his colleagues at Stanford.

In the typical school district, girls are at least three-quarters of a grade level ahead in English, and dead even in math, and in the poorer school districts,

there are grade level ahead in English and about a third of a grade level ahead in math. And so the broad picture here is that in K to 12 education, and indeed in every level of education, it will obviously come to higher education in a moment, what you're seeing is that there is a really pretty significant gap in favor of girls in school as opposed to boys.

A very important caveat is that those gaps are just much wider in certain places and for certain groups.

So for boys of color and especially black boys,

the gap between black boys and black girls is much bigger than the gender gap for other racial groups,

is much bigger in poorer communities.

And so there is a very strong class and race dimension to this too.

Essentially, the gender gap just magnifies the further you go down the socioeconomic scale, or you introduce a race equity lens as well.

Yeah, I want to hold on that for a minute, and this is a point you make in the book, which I think is a little counterintuitive because there's a way of coding this conversation as an almost backlashy conversation, a conservative take on where things have gone.

But something your book gets at very clearly is that this is very much an intersectional argument to use the terms of the day, that when you begin to stack what is happening,

let's take schooling here for a minute with boys,

and then you add in poverty, or you add in race,

or you add in some of these other markers, the situation gets very, very stark,

which I think is honestly one of the better reasons to be deeply concerned about it.

Can you talk a bit about that?

Because I think when we talk about boys and girls,

there's a tendency to keep missing that, the kind of subdivisions within there.

Yeah, and the different ways that different distributions overlap.

And again, it's one of the reasons why I decided I wanted to write this book

because you do see that this story of struggling boys and men is very largely one of less economically powerful, less advantaged boys and men.

I've come to the point now where for some of these categories that we're looking at,

I think it's borderline irresponsible just to look at the category black.

For example, in things like on-time high school graduation or higher education,

or even upward mobility, because what that does, of course it's appropriate to look at it in one way, but then you have to break it down because the differences between the outcomes for black boys and black girls, for example, are really very, very wide.

So I think that the intersectional lens applied, as I understand it anyway,

is to say, look, let's look at how different identities are coming together

in ways that would actually explain different patterns of disadvantage.

And here it turns out that when you add gender to the story, it goes in different ways.

So working class boys, low income boys doing really badly,

and as I said, especially black boys and men, by comparison to their sisters,

all to the girls and their communities.

And the last thing I'll say on this, and it turns out this is again something that really struck me,

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I didn't really know this.

It's one of these things that the scholars say, oh, well, it's a well-known finding in this literature.

And in this case, it means seven people knew it, which is that poverty,

school quality, family instability, et cetera, dramatically affects boys more than girls.

And so that means that there's an intergenerational element to male disadvantage as well.

And the fact that inequality does affect poverty and inequality do affect boys more.

As I think an opportunity, because what that means is that if you're serious about caring about boys and men,

which a lot of people on the political right would claim to be,

then you should get much more serious about poverty and inequality.

But also, by the way, if you're serious about economic inequality and poverty,

which a lot of people on the left would say they are,

you really need to look at the boys and men, because they are the ones who are struggling most in those groups.

One thing that was a striking finding for me is that we will talk about the way school is structured,

but this is showing up before school, you write, quote, girls are 14 percentage points more likely than boys to be school ready at age five,

controlling for parental characteristics.

Why do you think that is?

The blunt reason is that boys develop a little bit more slowly than girls on average.

I think we can assume that for this conversation people will,

your listeners will understand that these are averages and a fair question is how much the distributions then overlap.

But on average, five-year-old boys just aren't, they're just not quite as developed as five-year-old girls.

And that's why controlling for all these other characteristics is important,

and why looking at siblings is important too.

So it's just not quite as grown up as girls by that point.

And then again, there's a much bigger gap later in adolescence, which maybe we'll get to.

So it looks like the two big developmental gaps by gender are around the age of four or five and around the age of 14 or 15.

And the problem with those dates is that it coincidentally, those turn out to be when you're starting school and when you're getting into high school,

which are, in other words, very important transition moments where you see this big development gap.

So although there's a big heated debate about the male brain versus female brain and adults and so on,

how different are our brains, to which my answer is not very different and not in ways that really matter once you get to adulthood,

there's really no debate about the timing differences and that a girl's brains do develop earlier than boys,

and that seems to be particularly true at around those two ages.

So I think it's largely a neuroscientific thing, but I think there's also some evidence that boys are a little bit more sensitive to their environments.

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They're a bit more sensitive to poverty, a bit more sensitive to family instability. They benefit much more from getting stable foster care, for example, than girls. And so there's something also about, if you do have this disadvantage, beginning these early years, these crucial early years, that to the extent that there are problems in those early years, they'll be more likely to affect the boys than the girls and therefore show up in measures of school readiness. This is going to come up a couple of times in the conversation, but something that struck me reading the book, is that there are moments of what you might call biological determinism or gender essentialism, right, this thing about boys' brains developing a little bit later or being more aggressive, particularly as children. And then there's a lot that goes in the other direction, which I don't think you always actually call out, but struck me as I went through it from our cliches, right, this interesting finding that boys are more sensitive to their environments and seem to pick up more intergenerational inheritance, in some ways, culturally, socially, than girls do. I mean, that is, I would call that a narrative violation, right? Boys being more sensitive to their environments in a lot of different ways, masculinity being a much more fragile construct, which we will talk about boys in some ways becoming less adventurous, that there are things that we have claimed in society for a very long time about how boys are strong and robust and durable and stoic and so on. And, you know, women are emotional and sensitive and hysterical and, you know, you can run down the list of cliches. That is not really proving out right now in a way that I think fascinatingly upends a lot of our typical conversation. I came across this term in psychology a few years ago, which I find quite helpful in this debate, which is the difference between an orchid and a dandelion. Yeah, so it's a well-used, just conceptual framework, which the idea of an orchid is developmentally much more sensitive, right, takes a lot of work to make an orchid grow, whereas a dandelion will grow pretty much everywhere under all kinds of conditions, so dandelions are resilient. And it turns out that in terms of the environmental conditions, the boys are a bit more orchid and girls are a bit more dandelion. The difficulty is that no one really knows why. There isn't an obvious, as far as I know, an obvious causal mechanism that says, why is it that boys are more sensitive to these different backgrounds than girls? And there's lots of theories that fly around in evolutionary psychology, but I just, I haven't found any kind of convincing story as to why, but we do know that it's true and that it's true across all these different domains, all these different

dimensions.

So in one example that actually this would cross on the work of Raj Chetty that I know you know very well,

is that kind of neighborhood poverty just seems to affect boys more than girls, right, independent of the family's own income situation, like just in a poor neighborhood.

And you can speculate as to all kinds of reasons that might be the case, but the same with like a poorer performing school just seems to affect boys a bit more.

And as I say, I haven't found a kind of convincing explanation for why, but I agree with you that it's a narrative violation to the extent that the narrative is,

you know, if the narrative is boys are strong and independent, they don't need any particular attention,

girls need nurturing and tendering to the extent that there is any difference, it runs exactly the other way.

One thing you argue based on this difference in the timing of brand development is that we need to face up to the idea that school is simply structurally designed in a way that disadvantages boys.

Tell me what you mean by that.

Yes, and it's important just to say not structurally designed in order to be less favorable to boys.

So it's not intentional.

There wasn't some great secret feminist conspiracy 100 years ago when we were designing the high school system say,

aha, it'll take a century, but eventually we'll get away.

But now that we're in a situation where we have thankfully taken away most of,

if not all of the barriers to women's education, girls and women's educational opportunities and pathways and ambition,

we do see this difference opening up.

And what I mean by that is that the education system rewards certain kinds of skills and behaviors, which are everything else equal, more likely to be found in girls than in boys,

and more likely to come earlier in girls than in boys like organization, etc.

So I find the difference in the GPA gap and the standardized test score gaps really instructive in this regard.

There is a quite significant GPA gap in favor of girls, but there isn't on standardized tests.

Standardized tests now are basically equal.

So it's not that girls are smarter than boys or, of course, the other way around.

It's that girls have just got their act together a bit more.

They've got their prefrontal cortex kicking in.

They're turning their chemistry homework in.

They're getting their coursework done.

Those are what social scientists call like non-cognitive skills.

Or I refer to them as the turning in your chemistry homework skills.

And so to the extent that we reward those kinds of behaviors and that they are more likely to be found in girls than everything else equal,

that means that baked into the education system is something of a tilt towards girls.

It's just that we couldn't see that before because we weren't basically not letting girls go into college or certainly strongly discouraging them from doing so.

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So those natural advantages weren't as obvious.

And the other thing I'd say very quickly are the drop in the share of male teachers in public K-12 schools.

Not in privates, interestingly.

It's going up there, but there are fewer and fewer men in our classrooms.

That everything else equal.

I'm reasonably convinced does seem to have some implications for boys in the classroom.

So we're down to 24% of K-12 teachers are men now, down to 33% in the 80s and very few, particularly in early years and elementary and middle school.

And the last point is that something of a retreat from vocational forms of training, which everything else equal, does seem to have some gender effects.

Technicals, high schools, more vocational training seems to be a little bit more attuned to boys' learning styles than girls.

And of course you want balance here, but we've actually under-invested in those slightly more male-friendly aspects of education.

So you put all those three things together.

And what you end up with is a school system that not through intent,

but by accident has ended up being somewhat more female-friendly than male-friendly.

I was somebody who struggled terribly in school with these exact kinds of skills.

And so I'm very on some intuitive level sympathetic.

But I want to make sure I'm raising a frustration that I can imagine coming up right about here,

which is traditionally when we've had groups that were struggling in school,

kids of another race, poor kids, kids from a different socioeconomic class, women.

We've tended to turn that into a problem with them or the culture they came from or their genetic inheritance or something, right?

If you didn't do well at school, school was a testing ground.

And if you didn't test well, well, that showed there was something wrong with you.

And then now boys are struggling and it's like, maybe there's something wrong with school.

How do you think about that difference between we should change school around boys

versus we somehow need to change boys around school

or we're discovering something here that is more intrinsically telling?

I think I disagree with the way you've described,

the way we've treated those groups, or at least you've generalized it.

I think that one of the big gains actually has been to move away,

particularly I would say on the center left, away from that approach of saying,

well, what's wrong with you, right, individualizing these problems.

Well, that took a long time, I would say.

Well, I mean, if you go back to the, like in the 1970s,

this is a good test case, which is more specifically around gender.

Like in the 1970s, when we passed Title IX and we were really pushing

or putting lots of money in, trying to get women into STEM, et cetera.

I think that actually there wasn't the presumption

that the reason the women and girls were behind in education

was because there was something wrong with them.

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I think the presumption was because the system was sexist and society was sexist and schools were sexist and colleges were sexist and we needed to batter the hell out of those sexist institutions.

So I think you're wrong.

I think that actually one of the driving forces of the women's movement at least was not to say what's wrong with women, it was to say what's wrong with society, what's wrong with these institutions and move away from that.

Now, of course, conservatives are much more likely to take that approach, the one you've described, which is the individualistic one.

I actually think by contrast, what's happening now is that by and large on the center left, there is a tendency to say what's wrong with boys, what's wrong with men, why are they so toxic, why are they so lazy or whatever and to not look for structural problems.

So as I think we've moved now to a world where we're much better at looking at what are the structural forces facing other groups, but we're not doing that for boys and men now.

So in some ways, I see it almost entirely the opposite way to the way you're seeing it in terms of this structural versus individual way of looking specifically at gender.

And I could be getting the history of the 1970s and 1980s wrong, but my sense of it is not that we were blaming women and girls and saying what was wrong with them.

Well, I'd say two things on that.

So one, I think if you only start the clock in the 70s and 80s, that's sort of my point that, I mean, yes, we had a sort of moment of libertarian movements.

But even there, I mean, I came of age as a journalist at a time when the cultural pathology explanation for black kids in school and their achievement or what was happening in black families was extremely dominant. And now that a lot of that has moved over to white communities, that's become less true, right?

The ways in which we're thinking about breakdown of marital stability.

I mean, you know, this worked much better than I do in white communities now is much less about, oh, there's some kind of cultural pathology and much more about, and it's somewhat in this book too, there's a structural set of problems.

And I mean, you see this again with the difference between the way we've looked at crack and opioids.

So my point, I actually think you're right.

I 100% agree that the left one problem it has, it is resistant to making the same move from boys.

I think it's actually one of the very important contributions of your book.

But I also want to, I mean, acknowledge I guess in part to knock it down, but in part because I think it's been a real dynamic that it is an interesting move.

It is a difference in the way of looking at something to say,

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okay, as soon as a group begins falling behind in school, maybe we need to remake schools as opposed to begin looking for deficiencies in the group or in their parents or in their communities. Yeah, start fixing the individuals like one individual at a time, which is still, I think, the dominant narrative for many on the conservative side of this argument. And when they're being consistent about it, they also apply it to boys and men. They would say, yeah, they need to buck up. They need to stop looking at so much porn and video gaming so much. And they need to man up. They need to rediscover they're in a masculine, whatever, right? Take your cliché from the right. And of course, they could do the same for the left around toxic masculinity, stop being so toxic and pathological. But I think that this move that we've made, which is to say, well, look, without in any way dismissing the importance of what's happening to individuals, let's just look at the environments. Let's look at the structures. Let's look at the way in which the systems and structures around this person are informing their choices. And let's start with that, right? Don't necessarily end there, but let's start with that insight. And so you're right that what I'm trying to do is take what I think was in a very important move and say, let's look at structures and not just individuals and apply that to boys and men. And it may well be that it doesn't always work and that it's not the right structure, but I think that we should have the same instinctive approach when we see gender inequalities running one way as the other way. One very striking finding, given how clear the data is for girls doing better than boys in grade school, is it boys still perform a little better on most standardized tests? Tell me a bit about how that data has been changing and what you make of it. Yeah, and it's important. I think only a little bit better. I think it's gone altogether on the ACT now. So it depends which tests you're talking about, but that's generally right. And the way I think about that is those tests are largely getting a cognitive ability. Let's call it just smartness, whatever. Whereas things like GPA and so on are getting at these non-cognitive skills, which turn out to be very predicted by the way of life success and college success and so on. So I think historically we've probably over-weighted the smarts, the cognitive, right? The good test-taking skills. We're now in danger, if anything, perhaps perhaps going too far the other way. I'm not sure, but we need to rebalance it. And to the extent that there are gender differences in those outcomes, then what we want, of course, is a situation that balances both. But the way I interpret that difference is I don't expect, actually,

that girls will massively overtake boys on those standardized tests.

I think I would expect it to level out at something close to equality, because I think girls and boys are about as smart as each other.

So that's a great thing. That's a great gain, a great win for equality, if you like.

I think the more interesting stuff is when you get into those non-cognitive skills.

And then the question is, like, how much do they matter, right?

So, for example, when a college goes test-optional in terms of its admissions of a higher education institution says, you don't have to put your tests in, the main effect of that is to significantly increase the share of women by about four percentage points in that student body.

Now, you'd expect that because girls are just doing so much better on all these other measures, student government, GPA, etc.

The only place where there's kind of basically equality is on standardized tests.

And so I actually don't blame the institutions for doing that, but I think we should be eyes wide open about the fact that that kind of policy move is going to have these gendered effects just because we see these differences in the outcomes on these two very different measures of ability.

Let's move then to higher education.

You mentioned Title IX, which passed in 1972.

Maybe you can say a word on what that was.

But I think it's a good marker.

What is your gap like in higher education then and what is it like now?

So in 1972, Title IX was passed and that was a big change in US law that just essentially said that we had to have and enforce gender equality across the board in US higher education.

And it had really very positive and dramatic effects on women's educational opportunities and outcomes.

I mean, if you just look at the lines, it's pretty extraordinary how quickly things changed after Title IX.

At that time, when Title IX was passed, boys, young men were about 13 percentage points more likely to get a four-year college degree than girls.

Now, girls, young women are about 15 percentage points more likely to get a college degree than boys and young men.

And so we have Title IX level gender gap in higher education now.

It's just the other way around.

So what happened was...

That's an extraordinary finding.

I mean, not finding.

That's just the literal data, but it is an extraordinary statistic.

Yeah.

And I guess what I'm doing here is I'm using it to just dramatize to some extent the scale of the change to put it the way that I just put it.

You're right.

That's not difficult data to find.

But it's really interesting how many people are surprised when I tell them that because I'm like, well, it's there in the NCES data sets.

And like, didn't you know?

And of course, the answer is no.

Of course, they didn't know because it's not really anybody's job to make them know.

And it might not matter in the same way, by the way.

I mean, we might take a very different view.

Even if the gap's about the same or a little bit bigger now, we might very reasonably take different views about the gaps, not least because we might see them as having different causes, which indeed they do have.

The main reason for the gap now is that the boys are just performing not as well at high school.

That predicts how they do a college.

That's a very different problem to basically having this ceiling that we used to put on women's equality.

So an inequality doesn't necessarily mean an injustice, but it did in 72.

Does it now?

I would say no, it doesn't.

It just means we should look harder at the structures.

And so very quick catch up.

And then I think it's also important to note that nobody predicted or expected this great overtaking.

We were quite rightly focused in the 70s and 80s, and we really were focused on just how do we do better in terms of getting women and girls better educational opportunities and outcomes. But the lines just kept going, and no one expected that.

You cannot find anybody in the literature saying, well, wait, actually, this is going to turn out to go the other way, which I think is partly why we're struggling to kind of get our heads around it because it was just so, in some ways, unexpected that the lines would just keep going in the way they have.

Something you note, which I really didn't know.

I mean, I did know the college gap, although I didn't know that it was a perfect inversion of when Title IX was passed.

But the idea that female students are now twice as likely to study abroad, they're much more likely to do things like Peace Corps or AmeriCorps.

The gap is even greater in the UK's Voluntary Service Overseas Program.

That's really interesting to me.

Talk a bit about that observation and what you make of it.

Yeah, it's an example of what I now think of as the small data points as opposed to the big data points.

So you have these big data points like college completion that we just talked about, or GPA, or earnings, or whatever.

But then you stumble across these small data points,
which I find in some ways are more culturally illuminating.
So you're quite right that studying abroad twice as likely,
AmeriCorps and Peace Corps women twice as likely to be doing that as men.
And so there are these, like outside of the kind of mainstream data sets,
there are these really interesting data points
that I think indicate something about ambition, about aspiration,
about future orientation.
There's this sense of like, not of passivity, of drift,
of a bit checking out a little bit in young men and boys.
And you see that then playing out and things like more like to live at home with their parents.
That's like, you know, women are more like to buy their first home, etc.
And so you're seeing a whole series of scattered small data points
which I think speak to a deeper cultural problem,
which is something like male drift, but passivity, uncertainty, a bit lost.
So the women and the girls are actually just a little bit more metronomically going forward.
And I give you, actually, this is a big data point,
but another one that really struck me is that there's about a 10 percentage point gap
in college enrollment, four-year college enrollment between males and females.
But then conditional on enrolling, there's a very big completion gap,
and particularly four years.
So there's a 10 percentage point gap between conditional on enrolling,
graduating four years later in favor of women.
And so they're just much more likely.
They're more likely to finish high school, go straight to college, finish college on time, go.
And so there's a linearity to the progress of girls and young women
and more of a zigzaggy look and a bit more of a sense of retreat,
perhaps among many boys and young men.
This struck me as another interesting narrative violation that, you know,
we talk about men being very testosterone-soaked, risk-taking, aggressive,
and there's good evidence for that.
I mean, you talk a bit about aggression statistics
and they're very clear.
But packaged in all that, I think in our stories at least,
has been that men are adventurous, that we're explorers,
that, you know, we want to go out into the world and women are oriented to home and hearth.
And whatever the sort of underpinnings of this,
this is quite different what we're starting to see now.
I mean, the degree to which women are venturing out
and men seem to be closing in, including in sort of digital worlds and otherwise,
is striking.
Yeah, I say something along the lines of, like,
women have been having to fight against misogyny outside of them
and men are now struggling for motivation within themselves.

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And it turns out that actually men, if anything, perhaps need a bit more structure, a little bit more sense of a script, if you like, which maybe we can talk a bit more about. But even things like geographical mobility is really interesting. I think I discovered this after I finished the book, but in many countries women are much more geographically mobile. Now, partly that's driven by the higher education thing, but not just that. And so a great example of this is East Germany, where actually what happened was a lot of the women left and went to the West to seek new opportunities. And so there are parts of East Germany now, but there are massive differences by gender just in the populations. Also, not coincidentally, the heart of the reactionary right in Germany. So this sense of actually men being left behind, not moving, not getting up, not going, having less agency in many ways than women. And that could be partly related to the internet. I think in some ways the internet might be both bad news and good news in that sense, because it might be better that men are in the basement than roaming around doing antisocial things. We can maybe get into some of that theory as to like, is it good or bad that men are on the internet all the time? But I do think the kind of the broader point is that absent a really clear set of messages and scripts, men are actually not as likely to be adventurous. The only thing I wonder about, I'm just thinking about this recently, is like, is this a temporary effect? I've had a lot of people say to me, well, look, women are basically like immigrants now. They've had to fight their way in, they're fighting for it. They want to be independent. They're getting a message about being independent. So there's a generation or two of women that are just unusually like ambitious and aspirational now, and that will pass. Over time, that difference will go. So the aspiration gap could be just that women are just unusually like killing it right now and very aspirational and that will pass. But I'm not convinced, actually, I think that there might be something more structural going on here. That brings up something I've been wanting to ask about, which is the international data. Let's take schooling as an example here. When you look at peer countries, so other post-industrialized, mostly democracies, what do we see? We see the same patterns pretty much everywhere as a short version. To some, there are differences at different levels, but I think it's important that it's happening pretty much everywhere in terms of those advanced economies because that's a good sign that it's not something weird about the US K-12 system, for example. If it wasn't also happening in Canada and the UK and Western Europe and everywhere,

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then you might start to think, oh, maybe it's something about our system.

It's not.

It's something broader than that, which I think speaks to these more deeper structural issues that we're facing.

So in every OECD country, for example, there are more young women with a college degree than men.

The gap is much wider in more gender equal places, which you might expect.

So places like Scandinavia, there are much narrower gaps in other places like Germany, for example, has a much smaller gap than others in terms of getting some kind of post-secondary education, but that's largely because of the technical education system in Germany.

But the basic picture is, I know the UK best, that's where I'm from, the UK data, and the UK data is very similar to the US data in terms of educational outcomes for boys and girls.

As somebody who spends a lot of time reading about policy interventions, something that you tracked in here that I really didn't know and was striking was that there...

We see now a lot of pretty profound efforts to increase college attainment or better K-12 outcomes that look like they work, and then when you dig into them, they only work for women.

And you have quite a few examples here.

So I wanted to see if you could talk through the Kalamazoo study and then just generally what you think this might be revealing.

Yeah, it was the Kalamazoo one that sent me down this track.

So the Kalamazoo Promise is the most generous college scholarship program.

There are a number of these Promise programs now around the US, and essentially what they do is that they say,

look, if you're from this place, you can go to college for free.

So in Kalamazoo, if you come out of a Kalamazoo high school, you go through the high school system there,

we'll pay full tuition, we'll just pay for it in any college in the state.

So it's unusually generous as a Promise program,

but also it's really the only one that's been properly evaluated by scholars at the Upjohn Institute.

And I looked at their evaluation of the Kalamazoo Promise,

and it finds pretty good overall results, but huge gender differences.

And in fact, all the positive result is driven by women.

So it increased college completion for women by around 50%,

which they describe quite rightly as a really just very, very big increase,

but it didn't move the needle at all on male college completion.

There was no effect on male college completion.

So that again, it's one of those moments where it's not a data point you stumble across,

it's one that like you bruise your shin on, you fall over, you get up again,

you run around the corridors of Brookings showing it to everybody saying,

did you know this? They're saying no.

And then I dug in and I kept coming across other studies,

say a community college mentoring program, a school choice program, et cetera.

And I actually discovered that colleagues like Brad Hirschwein,

who was one of the on the team at Upjohn,

also David Orton, Melanie Wasserman, David Biglio and others, they've done work on this and there were sentences in their conclusions saying, and we find as so many other studies that this well-known effect that the intervention worked for girls or women, but didn't work for boys and men. And I was like, well, I didn't know it. I sort of think I should have known it, given where I am. And so I walked around the corridors again, I'm going to college, did you know it? And they're like, no, not really. So it was literally a handful of scholars knew that there was a pretty well known effect, that we had these interventions that didn't work for boys and men. So I ended up really digging in on that and finding examples. Now, of course, there are examples that go the other way, not many actually, and like a Boston pre-K evaluation found it was a bit better if anything for boys. And there are lots of things that seem to work for both, like the ASAP program, the community colleges and stuff. But to the extent that there are differences, they tend to break that way. And the scholars themselves very often weren't making a very big deal of it, with not some honorable exceptions. It was sort of noted, well, that's interesting. So I went around the same thing as that last study, move on. But I didn't want to move on. I thought, okay, this is just an important from a public policy point of view. Why is it that these policies or programs are working for one sex and not the other? So you went down to Kalamazoo and you talked to some of the men who would have benefited from it or maybe tried to and didn't. What did you hear? I heard a lot of what we've been talking around in terms of the social science actually, which was, you know, these guys were very, the ones who'd struggled, they hadn't finished, et cetera. And I heard a few things. I heard one is like, I couldn't make up my mind what to do, or so I kept changing majors. Then my friend had an idea for a business. So I stopped out to go and help him and I never got back on the rails or someone got sick and I couldn't get back. And so a bit zigzag versus straight line again. But they're also very, I think Tyrese was one of the guys that I talked to there. And he's like, well, look, the women are more motivated. They're more organized. They've got longer term horizons and they've got better study skills. He's like, duh. And said, I think it was one of them said to me, I always try and get women if I'm going to do a study group, right? Because they're just so much better.

They're just on it.

And that sense of just being on it really kind of came through from these guys.

So they were seeing themselves just a skill gap essentially,

but they thought explained most of the difference in the ability to take even the money.

So what it suggested to me, and this is a broader point now,

I think just from gender is that it's really about the skill,

you know, study skills and the ability to kind of make your way through college that's important.

And I'm pleased that some colleges a handful are starting to realize

that men are just finding that harder.

Queensborough Community College, for example, just launched a men's resource center.

There's one at the University of Oregon.

I think we'll see more of those as colleges just wake up to the fact

that the guys just don't have quite the same developed skills as the women.

That's certainly all of the ones I spoke to in Kalamazoo said.

So now to wrap this in an actual proposal,

you argue that the college gap reflects the K to 12 gap.

And I think your most eye-catching idea of what to do about it

is to redshirt boys in school to start boys in school a year later than girls.

Tell me about that.

Yeah, so based on the evidence that boys do develop later than girls, again, on average, age, of course, is a very crude proxy.

Like when do we put our kids in school, right?

How do you just like different countries, different states, different schools have different rules about this?

So it's a very arbitrary system in a way, is that when do we put them in?

But given that there is this gap and especially this gap in adolescence

where girls seem to develop earlier and in terms of non-cognitive skills,

they're a year or two ahead of boys and adolescents,

why not just start the boys a year later?

So if we start girls at five, start boys at six or four and five or whatever it would be,

and I see that as leveling the playing field,

it would mean that developmentally the girls and boys would be closer to each other,

even if chronologically the boys are ahead.

So the relationship between chronological age, developmental age

is a bit different for the two of them.

And so for us in ninth and tenth grade, for example,

where you see these huge gender gaps opening up,

I think you'd see less of that.

I think the boys were doing a bit better if they just had that extra year,

essentially for their brains to catch up with the girls' brains.

And the other thing, and here I'm putting on my sort of class analyst hat too,

is I really noticed that it's affluent parents quite commonly holding their boys back

and in one private school I went to in DC area, 30% of the boys

were actually old for their year.

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And I interviewed, this is from an Atlantic article that I did on Redshirt the Boys, I interviewed a bunch of people in and around these affluent parts of DC, and it was kind of common knowledge.

I mean, this woman who was actually a counselor to parents said, well, there are two entry dates, one for boys, one for girls.

Everyone knows that.

And so as soon as I see people in positions of power, people with the resources to do something, doing something, I'm paying attention.

And right now this is a very upper-middle class thing to do, but ironically, it's the boys who are the poorest, who would benefit the most from that extra year, not the ones who are richest.

How would this affect girls?

I mean, imagine a world where all boys are starting a year later, and that means they're going through, among other things, puberty earlier, they're that much bigger.

Have we been able to see in the studies

whether this creates a better or worse environment for girls in these schools?

No, so I think importantly, of course, it would mean actually that boys were hitting puberty at about closer to the same time as girls in the school,

because of course girls hit puberty quite a bit earlier than boys.

But I don't know of any good evidence for the effect of having older boys around in schools, has on girls in the school or in the classroom.

I think at a classroom level, it's reasonable to think that it wouldn't be a bad thing, right?

If the boys are just a little bit more mature, they're a little bit more developed,

and I think that's, if anything, going to create a better learning environment for the girls.

So if you're a 15-year-old girl trying to study,

then actually you want a boy that's a bit more like you in terms of age.

And one data point on this is that girls are twice as likely to date a boy that's older than them in school.

That's obviously a romantic thing, so it's a different measure,

but it speaks to something about that developmental gap, I think.

And it's not as if we don't have a lot of older boys in our schools anyway.

I mean, quite a few boys will get held back a grade.

And so it's not a new thing to have older boys in schools.

This would have caused me, there'd be a lot more of them.

And I think we'd have to evaluate. I think we'd have to see.

But on the face of it, I actually think that having slightly more mature boys in a school wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing.

I mean, they're going to hit puberty in high school anyway.

They're going to have that kind of the bath of testosterone that comes with puberty.

That's going to happen anyway.

And so actually, in a sense that it happening a year later to them in terms of the school year isn't a bad thing.

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I think in terms of the fact like, how do they deal with that?

I think it would be on balance. I think it would probably be good for everybody, but especially good for the boys.

So far as interventions go, this just seems like a dream to pilot and evaluate.

You choose six school districts in different areas of the country.

You randomize which schools within them do this.

You follow the students for 10, 15, 20 years and boom, you really know what's going on here.

But there have been some studies done that are more limited.

Talk me through the effect sizes we seem to see here.

Yes. So first of all, yes, if there's anybody listening who would love to pilot this, that would be great.

And I do think it needs careful evaluation for sure.

But so the studies that have been done and there's a very good one by Diane Schatzemback and Elizabeth Cascio.

And I should say by the way that they do not agree with me in terms of the policy proposal, although I partly base it on their research.

I want to be clear and honest about that.

But what they do is they take a study that actually just accidentally meant that there were some kids that were older in their classes.

As a result of an unrelated policy reform, it's actually about class sizes, reassigning kids to different class sizes.

But it had this nice effect of basically randomly putting kids of different ages into different school years in Tennessee.

And what they found was there were some positive effects to being absolutely a year older.

So it's not about relative age within the class.

It's about your absolute age.

But strikingly, they found that the effects were just much bigger for boys than for girls.

And for boys, they lasted all the way through high school graduation or at least SAT taking.

But for girls, they disappeared by high school and they were much bigger for boys.

What was nice about that study was that it was largely lower income boys and disproportionately black boys.

And so it was an unusual sample for this quotes redshirting thing because most of the people being redshirted tend to be more affluent and white.

And so it was a good a chance to see what the effects were.

And they were non-trivial effect sizes.

And so to the extent that we have evidence from those kinds of studies where there's been almost this accidental thing happening,

the evidence points to some positive effects.

The question is just, are they big enough to justify the policy overall?

And what I argue is that we should just change the default,

we should just think differently about it and say maybe by default just boys a year later than girls.

And of course, you could override the default just as we do now,

or maybe ultimately just have a system for admissions that was a bit more developmentally sensitive anyway.

You said those researchers don't agree on the policy.

What is their argument?

What don't they buy in yours?

So one of the concerns is that assuming that we keep girls starting schools at their current age, if we start boys a year later, then they're going to be older.

They might be more like to drop out of high school.

That's one thing because they hit a legal age where they could do so.

That's a real concern, but we could increase the school leaving age maybe.

Someone said to me, we'll just start the girls a year earlier because they're ready earlier.

So that's a different way of structuring the policy, of course.

But they're also concerned that there are costs because it's an extra year of childcare or pre-K.

So that's an important thing to bear in mind as well.

And they're worried about a lost year in the labor market.

They're worried that by taking an extra year, another year over finishing school essentially, that's one year less in the labor market, which has effects on earning, social security, etc.

I'm much less worried about that than them because honestly, the boys I'm most worried about are not generally going straight from high school to college to a good job and staying in work.

They're zigzagging one way or the other.

And so I think they're over waiting that one year for the group I'm most worried about.

But I think that's a reasonable concern.

And I think again, a reason why ideally you'd want to evaluate a policy like this.

Let me ask about one other solution in the educational space,

which is you argue for a dramatic expansion of vocational and technical schools, not just education, not just a class in the school, but schools really dedicated to this.

For people not familiar, tell me what the schools are like,

and then tell me the kinds of effects we see of sending voice to them.

So a technical high school is one that's intended to be one that is focused more around vocational kinds of learning.

And so it could, for example, be doing more stuff in STEM,

but it could also be doing more vocational training towards, for example,

some areas you'd consider to be more female, like healthcare, administration, etc.,

but also a lot more around what you see as kind of classically vocational classes

that were kind of more leading towards engineering type jobs or electrician, etc.

So they're just more vocational or auto mechanics is another one you do.

So it's essentially just more of what people might think of as quotes, more shop class.

Now, importantly, not instead of academics.

They still do very strong academic programs as well.

And there are a few states in the northeast of the US that do have quite a few technical high schools where we can actually draw some good evaluations from.

And I do propose we significantly increase that.

So they're just more hands-on learning, more vocationally oriented, more career oriented.

And the evaluation studies that have been done in places like Connecticut

show really some very good results in terms of earnings,

in particular for boys who go to those schools and no results for girls.

This is a great example of a counter.

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It's a counter example to the general trend of an educational intervention tending to work for girls and boys.

To the extent this is seen as an intervention, it tends to be quite pro-male.

It really does seem to help boys a lot more than girls.

And for me, that's the reason to do it rather than not do it.

And important, although slightly wonky point, is that the evidence that I look at anyway, suggests that career and technical education just spread across high schools, doesn't seem to be as effective as just, okay, here's a technical high school and you're going to go to a technical high school.

And I'd love more students and parents to have that choice.

There's a real suspicion around that some of them I think, maybe a bit of snobbery, some concerns about tracking, which obviously have deep roots in American educational history. So there are lots of reasons why the U.S. just is not as cool with the idea of these high schools as other countries are.

But I'm pretty convinced that they would be a good idea, not least for boys.

So let's move then to what happens after school.

How would you describe the way the labor market changed over the past 50 years for men and for women?

So we've seen dramatically different trajectories for many men, most men, and many women and most women, but by no means all.

So the way I see the labor market over the last 50 years, and here I'm very influenced by the work of people like Claudia Golden and others just looking at the labor market trajectories, is that for most men, things have been pretty tough.

And David Orter and Melanie Wasserman are good on this too.

It's been pretty tough.

So a data point here is that most American men earn less today than most American men did in 1979.

So not all, the men at the top are doing better than the men at the top are doing.

But just overall, that means that at the median and a little bit above the median, male wages are a little bit lower, controlling for inflation, of course, than they were.

We've seen rises across the distribution in wages for women, although, again, much faster at the top than at the bottom.

So the class gap has massively widened for both men and women.

But in terms of wages, of course, there's still a gender pay gap, largely as a result of the differences in the impact of parenting on men and women.

But another data point is that in 1979, only 13% of women earned more than the median man, the typical man, 13%.

And today, it's about 40%.

So about 40% of women now earn more than the typical man.

That's just a dramatic economic change.

The female wage distribution has not caught up entirely with the male one.

And especially at the top, there's still a lot more work to do, but wow.

I mean, it's hard not to look at that and see that as I do,

as the greatest economic liberation in global history.

The amount of economic power that women now have in the labor market compared to 50 years ago is extraordinary.

And then, of course, that plays out in employment too.

And the rates of female employment are just much higher than they were.

And actually male labor force participation has obviously dropped quite significantly.

You mentioned the gender wage gap and the role of parenting there.

I do think that's an important thing to talk about directly.

So the stat people will hear or maybe know,

for every \$100 earned by men, women are earned \$82.

Tell me how you understand that data and tell me a bit about how you parse the debate over that data.

Yeah.

And it's actually also just a great example of just another debate

where I was so frustrated by the arguments on both sides, honestly,

where there's always YouTube videos of why the gender pay gap is a myth, right?

And then there'd be someone saying, yeah,

but once you control for occupation and earnings and age

and time in the labor market, it basically disappears, right?

So it's a myth.

Well, even if all those things are true, well, it doesn't make it a myth.

You're helping me explain why it's happening, but it's not a myth.

It's just math.

It's just just true.

There's a great line in terms of controlling for what you're measuring, which I always think about when I see those videos.

Yeah, exactly.

Like, aha, control the way that differences I was looking for.

No, you see it in race too.

I mean, actually, I've seen studies that say, basically,

if you control for every aspect of what it means to be black in America,

then being black doesn't make any difference.

And so I think that's a real problem in the way you use controls generally.

And so I think that's a fair criticism of it.

So you're controlling away the very, you know,

the gendered nature of the labor market, for example.

But on the other hand, there is also a really strong sense among a lot of people

that, yeah, there's a gender pay gap and that's because of discrimination, right?

And in fact, I'm really struck by the survey evidence

that the more educated the respondent is,

the more likely they are to believe

that the cause of the gender pay gap is employer discrimination,

that it's because women are paid less than men for doing the same job.

And that's just not true.

It's actually for much more interesting and deeper and structural reasons about gender division of labor and childcare, occupational segregation, etc.

And so it's just a more complex and nuanced debate as so often than either side of this would prefer us have to believe.

You know, on the one hand, it's a myth.

On the other hand, it's a sign that employers are still patriarchs, discriminating wildly against women doing the same jobs.

And neither of those are true.

It's actually just a much deeper question.

I think at this point, it is fair to say we simply are using the wrong word for it.

So back when I was at Box's editor, Sarah Cliff, who is there too, who is now at the New York Times and is a great health and policy reporter, she did a ton of work on this.

And we actually did a Netflix episode about it and the whole thing.

And it's really a motherhood penalty.

And you can see this in different countries and you see it in lesbian couples.

Can you just trace some of that finding?

Yeah, I actually drew on some of Sarah's work when I was looking at this.

I think it's really, really excellent work.

And that is basically right.

I mean, essentially what you're seeing is it's a parenting penalty.

I'll put it that way because it actually turns out, as you see,

we have very good efforts from same-sex couples now, etc.

that it is just this fact of like, you have a child that affects what happens to you in the labour market.

And because that's mostly women, that's having this gender effect.

And it's really striking if you look at like,

earnings of men and women in their 20s now are very close,

but, you know, around the age of 30, something happens.

What is that thing? Well, duh.

And if you look at the charts that I think Sarah and others drew on from some of this work, Cleven has good work in Denmark, but Corinne Lowe,

I think, and others have worked in the US,

that it's still essentially true that for women,

having a child is the economic equivalent of being hit by a meteorite.

Whereas for men, it doesn't make a dent.

You just don't see it. You know, it's assuming they're in heterosexual couples.

And then what you see from this new data on same-sex couples is that it's really the parent.

So among lesbian couples, as you just, I think, alluded to,

is that the birth parent suffers this wage penalty.

What's interesting, of course, about lesbian couples is that very often,

you can take it in turns to be the birth parent.

And so to that extent, within the couple,

at least the quotes pain of being out of the labour market for a while

and learning some of the losing out in the labour market can be shared.
But in a straight couple, obviously, it's inevitable that the woman will be the birth parent.
And if the birth parent is still the one that's kind of paying this economic cost in the labour market, we're still going to see a gender pay gap.
And that is largely the reason for the gender pay gap now.
Now, of course, that doesn't mean, okay, nothing to see here then, move on.
What it does is it just raises the more interesting question, which is, huh.
Okay, so why is that then?
Why is it that women are taking more time out of the labour market?
Why does parenting have such disparate effects on women and men?
Is that really a choice?
How far is that choice constrained?
Why are the trade-offs so hard?
How do we make this better?
So in a way, it just raises a more interesting question rather than saying there's no question here to be answered.
So to go back to the pay data, and I think this gets to something very important.
We can talk about medians, right, the kind of imagined person in the middle of the data set.
We can talk about means, right, the sort of averages of everybody.
And one thing that one of those will catch and the other won't is that elite men, men at the very top of the income distribution, there's a very different story to tell about them than men in the bottom half, including comparatively with women.
So can you talk a bit about that difference and also the ways it might deform this conversation?
Yeah, it's true that men at the top are continuing to do really well.
You're also seeing like massive wage gains for educated women at the top as well, relative to where they were before, and especially for white women, actually.
I mean, white women now earn more than black men, for example.
But it is this top of society, it's the top 20.
This is back to my earlier work on the dream hoarders, the top 20%, and they tend to marry each other and so on.
And so there's just like massive, like runaway economic inequality, or there has been the last few decades towards the top, and that is driven to some extent by men.
So men at the top, yeah, still doing pretty well economically.
And women at the top doing pretty well economically a lot more than they were before.
And then when you get into the institutions, especially the apex, right, you start to see like who makes partner in law firm, who gets into the C-suite, etc., still very gender skewed.
And so at the apex of society, what you're seeing is that women are still struggling to turn these kind of massively increased educational credentials into economic power at the same rate as men.
They're obviously much more economically powerful than previous generations of women, but that translation mechanism just isn't working quite the same way.

And I think that's because there remain these structural barriers in some ways, in some areas like politics, which you know better than me, for sure, Ezra. But in things like how do you make partner? How do you get tenure? How do you get into the C-suite? And the way that the labor market currently works is that basically the way you do that is by killing yourself from about the age of 27 to the age of 37. Well, duh, they then wonder why it's harder on average for women to do that. And so again, it's the trajectories of elite professional careers that really seem to end up penalizing even these very highly educated women, which results in some pretty big gender pay gaps even at the top. One of the questions I think your book is asking is why there isn't more attention to how badly men are falling behind, predicting the bottom half, the income distribution, particularly black men, why the narrative of female disadvantage is still so stark and entrenched and sort of all-encompassing. And I do suspect there's some answer here that if you think about where a lot of this conversation comes from, who has access to the level of microphone to be in this conversation on this podcast, you know, writing stories in the media, etc., it is people, men and women, who are much more familiar and are themselves operating within the dynamics of elite institutions. And so, you know, when you think of some of the very culturally important documents here, you know, you think about Chell Sandberg's Lean In, or you think about Anne-Marie Slaughter's big Atlantic article from a couple of years ago on whether or not women can have it all, there is, as always, as in all things, an outsized focus on what are the dynamics of elite institutions because people from them have access to the media and write books and so on. And so, if they're telling a pretty different story, if that is a very different reality in those institutions than it is in society at large, you're going to get a very skewed conversation. And I do think that has happened quite significantly here. I think it's right. We're leaning in, but we're not looking down. And inevitably, our reference points are those that are around us. And so, and I think you're right. And it's a really deep problem that within elite discourse, you just look around. So, you know, if you're an upper middle class, educated woman trying to make law partner, you're listening to this, you're looking around saying, what is he talking about? Because all you see is guys, like above you and et cetera. And I'm not suggesting for a moment that, like, people at all levels can't be struggling in all kinds of ways, but the deep problems here are just much lower down. And so, this class fracture gets in the way of a more honest debate about this because even the women who are doing so much better than their mothers are doing at the top of the distribution, they're still looking around and seeing a society where there's still a lot more to do on behalf of women and girls. But that can simultaneously women, particularly into these C-suite jobs and so on, where again, there's been huge progress, but more to do. But we can think two thoughts at once.

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We can think, yeah, particularly around political representation, corporate leadership, et cetera. There is really quite a lot more to do.

And I think here we are into the design of labor market institutions and so on.

But whoa, look down here, look over there, crikey.

Over there, the boys and men are the ones who are really struggling.

And are we allowed to think both those thoughts at once?

And I'm afraid up until this point, it's been like a choice.

And that people have understandably but wrongly thought that focusing on the problems of boys and men, even those who are really disadvantaged, somehow distracts from or means less attention to the problems of women and girls, especially in these apex situations.

And I think that zero sum framing is just poisoning the whole debate as it is generally our politics. It's not zero sum.

We can think two thoughts at once.

Can you talk about Raj Chetty's findings here on the differences in upward mobility between black women and black men?

Because I remember being knocked over by this finding a couple of years ago and watching as the coverage of that study filtered out and realizing nobody knew what to do with this part of it.

Again, one of the studies that really influenced me thinking about this was Raj Chetty's work showing there's just much higher rates of upward mobility for men than for women from poorer backgrounds, but especially a huge difference in the upward mobility rates between black men and black women.

And he and his research team conclude that all of the difference between black and white Americans in intergenerational mobility is explained by black men, boys and men, all of it.

And there's actually more recent work from the Urban Institute that tries to control for the structural effects of being black in America, which again shows this huge difference in the impact on black boys and black men.

It essentially shows that taking away to try to look at the effect of structural racism and it would have massively beneficial effects for black men if we were to do better on that front than for black women.

So again, I agree with you that we didn't quite know what to do with it, or at least certainly perhaps in center left circles didn't know what to do with it because it sort of disrupted some of these senses that we have.

We like the world to be neat.

We like it to be white above black, men above women, straight above gay, take your thing.

And it all just stacks up neatly like that, like some sort of child's toy.

It's all just neat, but that's not how it works.

And especially when it comes to the experience of being black in America, gender is hugely important and seems to strongly disfavor black boys and black men.

And what Raj and his colleagues' work really showed was that just plays out in this intergenerational literature very, very strongly.

And what it means is that if we are genuinely worried about what's happening to black Americans,

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then most of our attention should go to black boys and black men.

So I want to talk a bit about the solutions chapters you have here.

And one opportunity that you talk a lot about is for men to expand their,

I think I'd call it identity in the labor market,

the way they understand themselves in relation to jobs.

So you talk a lot about the work on STEM jobs and the need for symmetrical work on what you call heel jobs.

Tell me about that.

Well, the first thing I stumbled across this great story looking into the background of STEM, which is a woman called Judith Ramele who had been brought into the National Science Foundation to promote what at that point was called SMET.

SMET occupations and SMET careers.

And she said, what the heck is that?

And they explained to her there was science, math, engineering and tech.

And she said, no, no, no, that won't do.

It'll have to be STEM.

So she renamed it STEM.

And the rest is like within a year, there was a congressional caucus and stuff.

So like never doubt the power of a good acronym in public policy.

Not all heroes were Kate.

Right.

So she turned it to STEM and sort of the rest is history in the sense that that became a huge thing.

First of all, for national security reasons,

and then really getting more women into STEM was a big push.

And even very recently, Melinda Gates has put a billion dollars into gender equality in the US and a huge chunk of that is going to get more women into STEM jobs.

And we have increased the share of women in STEM jobs from like single digits, like 8% back in the 1970s up to 1980 to like 20, approaching 30% now, 27, 28%.

So not 50%, but just massive gains in terms of getting women into those STEM jobs.

Not accidentally, it took huge amounts of money and effort and campaigning and people going to middle schools and massive recruitment drives of female STEM teachers and colleges and high schools and so on.

So it's been a really successful movement.

I think we should be very proud of the efforts that we've made to get more women into STEM.

But on the other side of it, there are these other jobs that are becoming more gender segregated.

So the labor market generally is becoming less gender segregated in STEM, but also in things like law and medicine.

But there are other areas, particularly areas like education and care and social work and so on, where we're becoming more gender segregated.

There are fewer men as a share of those professions.

And I refer to those as heel jobs, so health, education, administration, literacy.

So there's my acronym to compete with due to STEM, which is heel.

And there are fewer and fewer men in those heel jobs,

even though we need men in those jobs, those jobs are growing, etc.

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And so again, I didn't think it was getting enough attention that we're just seeing an absolute plummeting in the male share in, we've already talked a bit about education, but also in areas like social work and psychology, where we've basically halved the male share just in the last few decades. Give me a few of those numbers if you have them off the top of your head. In social work and elementary and middle school, it's gone from about 40% male in 1980 to about 20% male now. But one of the ones that really jumped out at me actually is psychology. I was surprised to learn that psychology was actually a bit, was more male in 1980 than it is now. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised by that, but it's really astonishing what's happened. So in the last, and here I'm using prime age and full time, but in the last 10 years or so, we've gone down from male share in psychology, like 39% to 29% massively declining share of male and Roma in psychology courses at university and so on. So I think that's interesting for a number of reasons, because it first of all shows you that occupations can get quite gendered quite quickly. They can also get de-gendered quite quickly, but it turns out you can gender them quite quickly, because that's happened in my lifetime, very quickly in a few decades. But I also think it's a problem for the provision of services. So when I wanted a therapist, I was actually given the issues, I was delighted to be able to work with a male therapist. When one of my sons needed a therapist, we were really happy to be able to find a male therapist for him, but that's getting harder and harder to do and rolling this forward, it's going to become even harder to find men in those caring professions. And I think that's a problem for all kinds of reasons, but one big reason why it's a problem is because men need those services. And if it's hard to persuade them to get that kind of care anyway, and it looks like it is a bit harder to persuade men, it's going to get even harder still if we don't have male providers. And so the diverse lack of diversity and provision and those heal jobs, I think is a problem for all kinds of reasons. I think one reason the psychology example is interesting too, is that psychology is very well paid job. So I think sometimes there's a view that one reason men stay out of these professions is that they don't pay that well, they don't have a lot of silo cache, and people say that about nursing and teaching, which is not, of course, always true, but there's an argument to be made compared to, say, STEM jobs. But psychologists can make quite a lot of money. They can, although they don't make as much money

given the levels of education required for those professions
as you might hope for,
and that's true for a lot of these professions.

These professions actually share an interesting characteristic,
which is that they have quite high credentials to get into them.
You need master's degrees to get into most of these professions,
and even though you don't need a master's degree to get into K-12 education,
it actually helps.

I think about 50% of K-12 teachers have a master's degree.
Of course, they all need a four-year degree.

So there's high levels of credential,
which don't translate into earnings in the same way that they might
if you went down a different path.

So you're right that some of those can actually pay quite well,
but conditional on the level of education that you have to get
in order to get those jobs,
they don't pay all that well comparatively.

An interesting counter example is that nursing,
you're seeing an increasing share of men.

It's up to, I didn't know, 13-14 percentage points now.

Male share in nursing down from single figures back in 1980s.

That's the only area where you are seeing some more men going in,
still very low levels, much more we need to do,
but of course, nursing actually is getting better paid.

So I think your intuition is right that kind of pays mattering here,
but you can make pretty good money as a nurse now,
and you don't necessarily need quite as much education
as you might for other professions.

I think it's no coincidence that we're doing a bit better
at attracting men into that profession.

So what do you think of as the explanations here?

I mean, one you'll often hear is that men are thing-oriented,
and women are people-oriented, and these are people-oriented jobs,
and men just don't want them,
and there's nothing that can really be done about that.

How do you take that objection?

I think that money matters for sure,
and so the fact that K-12 teachers essentially haven't had a pay rise
for 20 years matters just period, right?

Obviously it just matters for all kinds of other reasons,
and one reason it also matters
is because it is harder to get men to go into those jobs
when they pay relatively poorly,
especially conditional on the educational requirements

to go into them.

But I think there's a couple of things here.

One is that it is true that on average, women are a bit more into people, men are a bit more into things, but the distributions overlap quite considerably.

So the question is, as you look at these occupations, do they look like they could be the result of differences in, say, those natural preferences?

And the answer is, for a lot of these professions we're talking about now, the answer is no.

There's just no explaining it through those natural differences, and I was very pleased to find a study by a couple of psychologists, Rong Siu and James Rounds, where what they did was they looked at the differences between men and women on this people-things psychological dimension, right?

So I'm into things.

So I'm going to be an engineer or a car mechanic.

I'm into people.

I'm going to be a nurse.

I'm going to be a social worker.

And what they do find is that across the population, yes, on average, women are a bit more people oriented and men are a bit more thing-oriented.

But the question is, how much?

And then how does that map against occupational segregation?

And what they estimate is that if everybody was choosing occupations based at least on that psychological difference, about 30% of engineers would be women and about 30% of nurses would be men.

Okay, that's important because it's not 50%, right?

That suggests that even under conditions of total equality, you are going to see a few fewer women do engineering, a few fewer men do nursing.

That's explained by these natural differences.

But currently we're all a 15% engineering, 12% nursing.

So the question again is not that there isn't any difference.

The question is how much weight should we put on those differences to explain these patterns?

And in a lot of these occupations, there is just no explaining those patterns by natural differences.

So one of my sons is an early years educator, for example, and that puts him among the 2% or 3% of men in early years education.

In fact, as a share of the profession, there are twice as many women flying US military planes

as there are men teaching kindergarten.
And I'm going to go out on a limb here, Ezra,
and say that I think it's more important to have men teaching kindergarten
than women flying fighter jets.
It's not that they're not both important.
I found that to be a very striking comparison.
And it was something I was thinking about when I read it,
because we would like, or moving,
and thinking about childcare in our next spot.
And we would like to have male childcare for our 2 boys.
And it's quite hard to find.
And not because obviously women aren't amazing at it too,
but they're rambunctious.
My older one seems to connect with men more easily.
And it just seems like you should be able to do this.
And it is not a straightforward thing to do.
And you made the point that you think in the book
that because you actually did have male childcare,
that might have affected your son's decision to go into
early childhood education.
And we do know that representational and visibility effects like that,
including from some other work from Rosh Chetty, are very powerful.
So I'd like you to talk a bit more about that pathway,
about the ways in which having so few men in these positions
can become self-fulfilling for the future of them.
Yeah, I think that's right.
I mean, this was the mantra from the women's movement,
is that you have to see it to be it.
And I think we could really apply that to these roles here too.
And I do think that actually having those role models is hugely important too.
So actually one of my other sons said to me,
we were driving home from an appointment with pediatrician,
I don't remember how old he was, about six or seven,
but he said, oh, dad, I didn't know that men could be doctors,
because the doctor we'd just seen was a male.
I said, what do you mean?
He said, well, I didn't know that.
And I realized that every doctor he'd ever seen had been a female.
And so of course in his brain, perfectly naturally,
he assumed having only ever seen female doctors,
that men couldn't be doctors.
And so I said, no, no, actually, you know,
men can be doctors as well.
And nurses.

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It was a real vividly showed me just how imprinted these roles can become on us quite early.

And I do think that one reason to get more men into these professions is again, so that boys growing up see those roles as ones that are appropriate for men, because I'm also convinced by the evidence that there are sort of tipping points around the degree to which an occupation is pretty segregated.

And so it looks as if around something like 30% is an important number, right?

And I don't want to say it's exactly 30, but if there's an occupation that's like 3% male, it's quite hard to go into that as a guy.

And similarly, if like only 5% of engineers are women, it's quite hard to go into that as a woman, right?

But one of my frustrations, honestly, is that even getting people to agree that it's a problem that we have fewer and fewer and fewer men in these occupations, let alone spend money or political capital on doing something about it, really frustrates me because I'm worried about this tipping point thing.

So right now, as I said, 76% of K-12 teachers are women. What about when we get to 80% or 85%?

It's just going to get progressively harder to persuade boys and men that teaching is a career for them unless we can, I think, start to turn the tide a little bit on the share of men in those professions right now.

We've been talking a lot about economics here and economic outcomes, but I want to be mindful that there's a lot more to life than a paycheck.

So tell me a bit about what the data show right now on mortality.

Yes, so-called deaths of despair.

That was a term that was, I think, originally used in the Atlantic, but popularized by Ann Case and Angus Dayton.

They're much higher among men than women.

Those deaths include suicide, alcohol-related illnesses, and drug overdoses.

So opioid deaths are at 70% plus male.

Men are about four times more likely to commit suicide than women are.

It's risen by about 25% as well over the last 10 years or so.

It's risen for all groups, but because the starting rates are so much higher for men, you're still seeing this kind of fourfold difference in rates of suicide.

Obviously, men die earlier, but that's for all kinds of complicated reasons.

And they're also much more likely to die from COVID, by the way.

One of the most interesting stories about COVID was the way it played out.

And about twice as many middle-aged men died from COVID as middle-aged women in the U.S.

That's a little bit of a separate story in some ways,

but overall what you're seeing, I think, in these deaths of despair is not just a mental health crisis, although, of course, you're seeing that but to some extent a cultural crisis.

To some extent, a crisis of meaning, a crisis of identity.

I quote one academic saying that men lack ontological security, which is not a great sort of rallying cry.

What do we need? Ontological security, when do we need it now?

But what he's getting at there, I think is exactly right, which is a sense of like a secure place in the world, a secure sense of like, who am I, I have a role, and that I am needed by somebody or something at least.

I think that sense of being needed is hugely important.

And I came across a study by Fiona Shand, published in the British Medical Journal, which looked at the words that men used to describe themselves before suicide.

And the two words they most commonly used were useless and worthless.

And of course, that's a selected sample, a tragically selected sample of men.

But nonetheless, I thought this, that's not just words.

There's actually something here about a sense of like, I won't be needed.

And many of the men will say that they think that their families and communities will be better off without them than with them.

And I think that's a very deep problem that we should take very seriously indeed.

I do want to hold on COVID for a second, because I think it operates as a useful case in part because it doesn't have some of the cultural baggage or blame or you got yourself into this mess that people sometimes attach things like drug overdoses and I would say wrongly, but nevertheless.

And the death rate divergence was very striking and you write something that feels true to me, say quote, almost every major think tank and international organization in the world produce reports on the negative impact of the pandemic on women.

Many written in a hyperbolic tone.

By comparison, the much higher risk of death from COVID-19 for men warranted barely a mention.

Tell me a bit about that and what you're getting at with it.

Yeah, and it's an area that I ended up working in and producing reports for Brookings on this gap between men and women.

And I tried to get other colleagues involved in it and so on, but it's just like, well, I'm not a public health person.

What am I doing this?

And the honest answer was because nobody else was and even the organizations who were collecting the data that showed these gaps were not really promoting them and weren't actually all that thrilled necessarily that I was using their data to highlight this gender gap, really very significant gender gap, which is global, by the way. And I think that it does show the institutional asymmetry that we currently have.

So there were a huge number of organizations, councils, reports, etc. on the impact of the pandemic on particularly women's employment. There was lots of discussion of a she-session because women's employment rates did drop more precipitously than men's. Of course, everyone's just dropped.

It was like an asteroid hitting the economy, but actually women's rates have bounced back pretty well. And so I don't know a credible labor market economist now that would still use the word she-session.

Turns out that it kind of came out in the wash.

That doesn't mean there weren't other issues for women, by the way, but there were huge issues for men, including dying.

And we didn't hear very much about that because there are no institutions, or at least no responsible institutions, or respected institutions whose job it was to point out that fact to us. Whereas there were lots of institutions whose job it was quite rightly to say, how will this thing, in this case a pandemic and COVID, affect our stakeholders, i.e. women and girls?

There are thousands of people whose job it is to get up every morning and write about that and think, how will this affect women and girls?

And they did a pretty good job of it.

There were a lot of reports.

And of course, the reports meant they got lots of coverage, but there were just no equivalent, really, reports saying, well, hold on, what's happening to men here, and particularly this greater vulnerability to death, just wasn't getting very much attention.

So I'm not blaming anybody for that.

I'm just saying that there just aren't any institutions whose job it is to draw attention to that.

But that institutional asymmetry, I think, does create a problem down the line because it means that someone's going to talk about that.

And those people who are talking about that will only be people on the internet who will then use the fact that mainstream institutions are not talking about it as evidence that you don't care about boys and men,

that you've fallen into a feminist conspiracy.

Well, I think it's not just the existence of institutions, but also the existence of accepted frames, right?

So one thing that was true in the pandemic, and this is an accepted frame because it is a true frame, is it when there are crises of family life, women often bear much more of that burden.

And so the dynamic of pieces that now, just like always, something has gone wrong and women are being asked to be, you know, working and or sacrificing their work to immediately go back and now run Zoom school and, you know, also handle the elderly parents and so on.

It was all true.

And we sort of knew where to put that.

But the fact that men were dying at a much higher rate, although that does actually connect to things like the deaths of despair and trends in male mortality, there wasn't as much of a kind of accepted, like this is where this fits in the conversation.

And this is what you do about it.

There was that again on race.

I mean, we heard a lot correctly about the toll the pandemic was taking in, say, black communities.

But the gender death rate, which I was myself slow to realize was happening, was really, really quite large.

I mean, it is not a small difference.

I focus here because I think it's important for a bunch of the things we're talking about in this conversation is you get a lot more coverage of things where the frame is more accepted and close at hand.

Not because other things are exactly suppressed, but because a lot of things just go with the cultural grain.

Yeah.

And if it confirms our priors, it goes with the grain.

As you say, it kind of causes you to just start nodding your head almost subconsciously, like, yeah, once again, this will be terrible for women, et cetera.

As you say, it fit.

And it's uncomfortable to go against those frames.

It's uncomfortable to say, well, hold on, this thing's happening, which actually doesn't fit with that.

But it's also true.

And what that means is we've just got to be better about reframing.

We've got to get better at just looking at our frames and saying, huh, OK, well, that's true there, say, around some issues around child care.

But it's not true over here.

And it's true for this group, but it's not true for that group.

And actually, I think kind of where I use our frames a little bit more loosely than we currently do.

But I also think that it's a bit of a counter example to something we were arguing about a while ago, which is this individualization of the problem.

So you're quite right that there was correctly attention.

And I did some work on race gaps in COVID as well, differences in racial outcomes.

But that tended to be at least among mainstream institutions to look for structural reasons why that was the case.

It wasn't typically described as the fault of black people or Hispanic people because they had more preexisting conditions or they wouldn't wear a mask or they wouldn't get vaccinated or whatever, or choose your kind of reason.

But all of those were actually applied to men.

And so there were quite a lot of, quite a lot of COVID, quite a lot of stonewalling is weighing.

Well, it's because men, you know, they have preexisting conditions, more than women.

That turned out not really to be true.

They won't wear a mask.

They won't get vaccinated.

So actually, I think it was a bit worse even than you're describing it.

There was a 10, even in order to make it fit with the frame, people, particularly people in mainstream or maybe sense of left institutions had to find a reason why it was men's fault.

Rather than saying, OK, let's see what's going on here.

But I think the deeper point here is just that we,

I've really kind of thinking this much more recently.

And since I've been out talking about the book is that just the lack of like boring institutions looking at the issues of boys and men

is a problem because it means that the, there aren't,

there's an institutional framework through which to have these conversations.

And I'm thinking about what that means in terms of my work going forward.

But it also means that this stuff still goes somewhere and it goes to the internet.

It goes to the men's rights groups.

It goes to the people who can really exploit it.

And I'll give you one example of this.

I was having an argument with a Mizrahi activist the other day.

He would dispute the label, but very alt-right guy.

And he said, look, they don't care about men's male suicide.

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I said, what are you talking about?

Of course, they, first of all, who's they and what do you mean?

He said, he means, I mean the CDC.

I mean the White House.

I mean the government.

They don't care about male suicide.

I said, yes, they do.

Why did you say that?

He sent me a link and the link was to the CDC page on suicide disparities.

He said, where does it talk about men?

And he's right.

It doesn't.

It talks about all kinds of other disparities by race, LGBTQ, rural, urban, veteran, non-veteran, et cetera.

There isn't a subsection.

It doesn't just straightforwardly address the fact.

There's a massive, massive gender gap in suicide.

And so I'm like, oh, I'm cursing the CDC people who made that decision because they're making life much harder for me as I'm arguing with this men's rights activist.

So when he says they don't care because they didn't cover the COVID deaths, they don't talk about male suicide enough, makes it harder for me to tell him he's crazy.

And I think this institutional asymmetry means that they don't sound as crazy as they should when they say that we don't care enough about boys and men.

And I think the goal here has to be to make them sound crazy.

It has to be when they say that, to say, what are you talking about?

There's a whole task for us on male suicide.

There's a whole thing in the White House about boys and men.

What are you talking about?

Make them sound crazy.

But right now, because of this reluctance to address the issue, we create a huge vacuum and it makes them sound plausible when they claim that we're not addressing these issues.

And I think that's fatally damaging.

I will push just a little bit on this in one particular way, which is I think the COVID example is a very good one.

That is a clear case of what you're talking about.

I think deaths of despair have been widely, widely, widely covered as a male problem.

That's not one where I think if you've followed the debate, like I followed COVID very closely and it took me time to realize that there was this huge gender gap in mortality.

But if you follow the deaths of despair discussion from the beginning, it has always been about men.

Yeah, it's been more about white.

It hasn't more about more white and then working class before men, wouldn't you say?

Well, yeah, I mean, it was initially framed as a white working class thing.

Although I think that the data now shows that that has changed.

We've developed a terrifying, a terrible form of quality there.

But I think it was always framed as a male thing.

And I think it goes a little bit to this point of frames that people are used to because it has been connected to something else you talk about in the book, which is another place where I think there's a lot of widespread attention to a problem of men.

This is not as severe but is loneliness, which I think is very commonly covered as a problem of men.

And you write quite a bit about the male friendship deficit, which I think is pretty important.

For instance, a 2021 report from the Survey Center on American Life identifying a friendship recession with 15% of men saying they have no close friends at all, which is up from only 3% in 1990.

So I want to hear what you're saying about the question of frames, but I'd also like you to talk a bit about the male friendship crisis, which in terms of a life well lived, I think is pretty profound.

Yeah, so I think you're right.

As I reflect on it, the working class guy, and I think actually now you're right, the evidence is that it's not just white for sure.

In terms of deaths of despair, there has been some concern about, okay, what's happening to these guys?

And that is from people like Wassam in an auto, but also Nigebistat and so on too.

I think that the concern about loneliness and social isolation is one that we have to look at through a gender lens.

And I agree that we are.

You do see, I think, quite a bit of attention being paid to this idea of like what's happening to these especially young men, these kind of lonely and isolated young men, partly because of the suicide rates and so on too.

So I agree.

And the evidence again is just so striking.

There's a deeper problem of friendlessness and isolation among men than among women.

I think there's all kinds of reasons for that.

I think women typically get a bit better at doing that emotional maintenance.

I also think men have these competing attractions online for kind of in real life friends, if you like.

So there's lots of reasons for that.

But the kind of key point here is it means that the mental health problems that we're seeing

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of girls and boys and young women, young men are just playing out very differently. And so for young men and boys especially, I think they're more properly seen as problems of isolation, of retreat, of despair, of a sense of not being needed, lack of purpose, etc. Whereas I think what's happening for a lot of girls and young women is a sense of like they feel like the environment is quite hostile. There's a lot of relational bullying. Social media is having a very different effect on women and young girls. I think the non boys and young men, you know, the tiktok, there's relational issues and obviously issues around body image and self-esteem. It's playing out differently. It's not that one is worse or better than the other. It's just that they're playing out differently. But for sure, among boys and young men, and again, especially those with less economic power, this issue of isolation is a growing one. They just feel alone too much of the time. This one really, I recognize it as by no means a worst of what we've talked about, but it breaks my heart very particularly. And, you know, I have two young boys and I worry, I mean, they're not there yet, but I worry about them. These findings on friendship really always break my heart in a particular way. I have incredibly deep male friendships. I mean, I have friends I deeply love and have for many, many years. And so I don't have as much, I feel like, empathic access to this one as others. And so it confuses me more. And in particular, what confuses me about it is you have to explain a rate of change. You could say men have been stoic and, you know, they don't share their feelings. And all that stereotypically culturally would have been truer, I think, about mid-20th century men than men and boys today. But you're seeing this really sharp drop since the 1990s, right? I would say men are better at talking about their feelings than they were in 1990, but they have fewer close friends according to the data. How do you understand that? But what is an explanation that accounts for a drop since 1990? First of all, at just a personal level, I agree with you. I think these findings are, they are genuinely kind of emotionally resonant when you see just how isolated many of these men are. I think Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, once said that the mark of a civilized person was the ability to weep over a column of numbers. And there's been quite a few columns of numbers that I think that's applied to, in my case. Actually, I have male friends who I deeply love, too. And I think it's very important we use the L word, by the way. I think we're just all getting better at that. So what's happening more generally, I think what's happening is a de-institutionalization

of male friendships and male relationships.

To the extent that perhaps men might struggle, just I think for some natural reasons, but for other reasons, just struggling a little bit to make those connections or a little bit less relational, perhaps just off the bat than women.

What that means is the institutions through which you form male friendships, whether that's schools, colleges, workplaces, places of worship, Boy Scouts groups, etc. Those institutions are actually more important for the building and sustaining of male friendships, everything else equal, even than the female friendships.

And stereotypically, again, like the shared experience of becoming mothers and those biological differences might actually give women access to kind of relational networks that it's harder for men to access, right? Becoming a father doesn't automatically open up a network of other new dads in quite the same way that it does for them.

So what that means is if there are fewer men in colleges, fewer men in the workforce, fewer men in all of our religious institutions have a gender gap.

If we do see the falling away of institutions like the Boy Scouts, or in fact the Boy Scouts have become co-ed.

So what that means for male friendship, I don't know, but I think it's a mistake because I do think there's something to be said for those environments.

So basically what I'm suggesting is that the institutions, including institutions of marriage, where women would do a lot of the work in terms of kind of sustaining those friendships, as those institutions have atrophied, it's exposed the fact that men were more reliant on those institutions

for making and keeping friends than women were.

And so you see this gap opening up.

I can't prove any of that, but I have this strong intuition that institutions matter more to men in terms of those relationships than due to women, and men are actually in those institutions much less than they were before, including the institution of marriage and the institution of the family.

Speaking of columns and numbers that might make you weep, one of the ones that I've been thinking about since I read it is you write, quote, women and men are equally likely to say that their job or career provides a great deal of meaning and fulfillment.

That's 33% among women, 34% among men, but in almost every other domain, there was a marked gender gap.

So 43% of women across all age groups mentioned children or grandchildren as a source of current meaning, compared to just 24% of men.

Can you talk about that fragility of meaning for men, the way in which women seem to have more diverse sources of meaning, and men have their identities built on more narrow pillars?

There's a couple of things here.

I think one thing is that I have come to believe, and this is something that I have reluctantly come to believe,

that male identity or masculinity, if you prefer, is somewhat more socially constructed than female

is.

I don't like that. I'd prefer it not to be too bad.

That's my reading of the evidence that we have to do.

There's more of a construction job for boys to become men and for men to know their role than for women.

I think that's largely around the differences in reproductive roles.

So I think there's just a more of a quotes fragility to masculinity.

I don't mean that as that's used as a slur, quite often like eye rolling, oh yeah, fragile masculinity, etc.

I think it's just an anthropological fact that masculinity is a bit more fragile in the sense that it has to be more constructed.

Like every society has kind of worked on finding pro-social roles for men that attach them to communities and so on.

So I think that's a finding that I find a little bit uncomfortable, but I nonetheless am reasonably convinced of.

So I think that that's a big part of the story here, but I think it's also true.

At least right now, women have developed something more of a balanced portfolio in terms of their sources of meaning.

They've expanded their sense of meaning to include like careers and occupations, but without giving up strong sources of meaning that they get from families and relationships and so on too.

Whereas men are still putting too much of their eggs in one basket if you like.

I think there's a sense of male identity is still too narrowly construed.

And what that means is that if you fail to succeed in that pretty narrow area of meaning, then you don't have as much to fall back on.

The idea is here is what psychologists call cognitive self complexity.

So you have a bad day at work, but you did well as a dad or vice versa.

And it turns out that women have a bit more of that ability to switch between different sources of meaning,

which might make them a little bit more resilient, but men are still a little bit too stuck on the source of meaning being from their occupation,

from their job and from their income, which is why I think the loss of a job has much bigger psychological impacts on men than it does on women.

It's bad for both, but it actually turns out to be a much bigger psychological blow for men, because again, I think that so much of their sense of themselves is wrapped up in that.

Draw out for me for a minute more that anthropological idea that masculinity is more fragile, is more constructed.

As I understand it, this has to do with the idea that motherhood is a much more obvious role in the creation of the human species than fatherhood.

Is that basically right?

Yeah, I think it's a broader point that there are clearer markers, let's say, for the kind of different life stages that women go through than men,

which are then culturally either they're venerated or pathologized, depending on your point of view.

But there is a kind of clearer sense of what it means to go from girl to woman to mother, etc.

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And then there is perhaps for men, but also because just now I'm thinking like over a long historical time,

this sort of sense of knowing who your child is, looking after the child or the tribe and so on, it's just been a little bit more of a question for men.

Then I think that's meant that the kind of roles for men, the rights of passage for men, etc., have tended to be more elaborate.

And I don't think that's just because of straightforward patriarchy.

I think it's because we have had to be a bit more intentional about taking boys and men through those rights of passage.

And there's actually a line from Margaret Mead, which I've used so much that I've committed it essentially to memory.

Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, who said that in every known human society, men have had to learn to be nurturing.

It's rested on the learned, nurturing behavior of men.

And this behavior being learned is rather fragile and can disappear quite quickly under circumstances that no longer teach it effectively.

And the reason I like that quote is because it's really getting in the sense of like, yeah, men can nurture,

of course they can, maybe not exactly the same way as women, but it's more of a learned behavior for men.

And so every known human society has found ways to teach men how to do that nurturing.

But because it's learned, taught, scripted, it's a bit fragile.

It can disappear a bit more easily.

And I fear that we're in a period right now where we're not doing a very good job of setting out that learning, that teaching, that script for men,

partly because at some level we kind of wish we didn't need it, think we don't need it.

Honestly, personally, I sort of probably kind of wished in some ways we didn't need it, but I think we do need it.

And absent that, we leave a lot of boys and men not flourishing in this whole new androgynous world where there can be whoever they want,

but actually finding on internet influences that we might prefer them not to find.

Well, not, I mean, not just not flourishing, but roping for some kind of leadership.

Yes.

We've been living through this interesting period of this where there was the very fast and very profound rise of Jordan Peterson,

the Canadian psychologist and sort of, I think, reactionary political thinker, which is how the left knows him.

But more than that, I think for his own fans, he's functionally like a self-help guru.

Then he's kind of ebbed and then entertained, who I think in a lot of ways is a lot worse than Peterson.

There's a really clear and consistent searching right now for these hyper-masculine, I would say, pretty aggressive and angry voices

that are in a very tough, lovey way trying to tell men how to be men or trying to tell lost men how to be found men.

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Yeah, I love lost men how to be found men.

I think just like what's happening here is the internet searches, how should I be a man today?

What does it mean to be a man today or whatever the equivalent is?

I see Jordan Peterson as something like a gigantic and quite empathetic listening ear.

I mean, he is a psychologist by background, of course.

I mean, what he says is honestly either kind of wrong or a little bit crazy or overstated or obvious.

I don't find, at least on this issue, I do think he has contributions elsewhere.

So he's not innovator.

He's not saying anything at all remotely kind of new.

All he's just saying is, I hear you, I get it, I understand it and he's visibly on their side.

He gives young men the sense that someone's hearing them, articulating some of their concerns, has their back.

And the mere fact that that can turn him into a global phenomenon, right?

He has to book like Wembley when he goes to London.

So millions of copies of his book.

What's interesting about that, of course, is not the supply because I don't think his supply is the demand.

And then enter Andrew Tate and I see Andrew Tate, who's this internet influencer, massive influence.

What's interesting about Tate is that he makes Jordan Peterson seem like George W. Bush when Donald Trump came along, right?

To remember that moment when all the liberals around the dinner table started saying, you know what, George Bush, he wasn't so bad.

You know, he was a pretty good guy really.

I want to say that I am not one of those people and I do not go in for George W. Bush revisionism.

Like, he caused a tremendous amount of damage that guy.

But by comparison to Trump, I know just a lot of people saying...

Yes, as a personal figure, there was definitely a yearning for him.

And you're right about this phenomenon. It's just a real big bug.

Yeah, I think I may have heard you say that before.

So it's a badly chosen analogy for at least this audience of one.

But maybe other people out there have had this experience.

No, you're right. You're right. You're right about what you're describing.

Bush doesn't seem so bad now that Trump is along.

And the same things happen with Peterson.

Peterson is a pretty kind of tweedy, academic-y guy who's just stumbled across this reservoir and monetized it.

Andrew Tate is just a straightforward, performative, algorithm-driven video misogynist who's been deplatformed.

He's now been arrested for alleged rape and trafficking.

And he's just mastered the algorithm, but he's everywhere.

Actually, as I was finishing up my book at the beginning of 2022, my son said to me, well, you've got to write about Andrew Tate, Dad.

If you're writing about men, I said, who's Andrew Tate?

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I asked the question that people have been asking in the months since, which is, who is Andrew Tate?

And he told me who he was and showed me him.

I said, now I don't need to worry about him. He's a fringe figure.

Of course, my son was right and I was wrong.

By the summer, he had 12 billion views on TikTok.

He was the top influencer in the world.

And so just a massive global phenomenon.

He made Jordan Peterson look like an amateur in terms of the ability to capture the sense of it.

And he performs this sort of retrograde, cigar smoking,

Maserati buying bronze, muscular, shade-wearing way of being a male.

And so I talked to a lot of young men in my life about like, what's going on with Tate?

And they say, well, a lot of it is obviously crazy stuff, misogyny.

But actually, at least he's answering the question.

He's offering advice.

He's saying it's difficult to be a young man.

Here are some answers.

And my view about someone like Tate is that if we don't like his answers, the solution is not to just tell boys to stop looking for those answers.

It is to provide some better ones for ourselves.

And it is to recognize the fact that there is a real search here,

a real demand for an answer to the question of,

how should I be a good man today and remain a man?

I want to be a boy. I am a boy. I am a man.

How do I do that?

I am in favor of gender equality.

I want a world of gender equality and most boys and men do.

I don't want to feel like I'm the problem here.

I don't want to feel pathologized.

I don't want to keep being told how toxic I am.

Like, can you help?

And unfortunately, I think we, we as the mainstream institutions and so on, because we haven't acknowledged some of these problems sufficiently or embraced them, we've actually driven a lot of this stuff.

And so I think we've provided a lot of the market for people like Tate and Peterson to sweep up.

I have very complicated feelings on this.

And people on the show have heard me before say that a question I'm very interested in was what a Jordan Peterson of the left looks like.

And a real frustration I have with liberals on this is I have read and heard repeatedly Peterson and Tate described in this weird way as boring, right?

Unoriginal, uninteresting.

And if you're looking at phenomenons like that

and just kind of casting into the bin of advice you've heard before,

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you don't need to think about what it is doing.

I think you've like closed your mind in a way that is really dangerous.

And as you say, we'll let these kinds of figures flourish.

What I'm not sure of is that there is some kind of pro-social shunting of that same impulse.

And I do think it's fair to say that Peterson, who I have a lot of problems with, is a quite different sort of figure than Tate.

There's an overlap, as you would call it.

There's an overlap in the distribution, but there is a difference in what they are.

But I think something you see if you watch them and if you go back to other figures who I think were a little bit like this or would have been like this today.

I mean, I think about the popularity of Andrew Dice Clay,

the hyper-misogynist comic in the 90s,

that there has long been an interest among young men in these transgressive, angry figures.

And they both have this.

Tate is very angry, like a thrumming anger, right, as a sort of MMA, a mixed martial arts background.

If you look at Peterson, he's always struck me as having the affect of a clenched fist.

He is also emotional and he'll cry, but there is a kind of like a readiness to fight and everything he says is a, he's wound very tight.

But that when you talk about demand and supply,

I wonder if it is actually in the power of the left to supply something

that answers the demand for Andrew Tate, because sometimes demand knows what it wants.

And maybe if you're a 14-year-old boy, like what you want is transgressive

in a way that it is very hard for institutions or people who want to be pro-social to answer.

I mean, there's always this tendency to say on the left, like,

oh, let's give the good version of this thing, but there's an always a good version of that thing.

So I'm curious what you think it would actually look like.

Yeah.

Well, I think what it means is that we really have to pass out the different elements

of the demand for these kinds of figures, the different levels of interest, right?

You don't get 12 billion views on TikTok just by meeting one kind of demand.

And I do think that people like Tate, some extent Peterson,

and all the people that you've just mentioned,

actually might be meeting different kinds of need, answering different questions,

and that actually separating them out is an important part of the exercise.

So if we go through them, I'm thinking out loud here,

but you mentioned transgression, right?

I think being transgressive is just always appealing,

and especially to adolescent boys, right?

It just is, always has been.

And right now, a way to be transgressive is to transgress against whatever you want to call it, feminist, orthodoxy, mainstream society, et cetera,

and perform this sort of just outrageous.

I mean, Tate sort of makes James Bond look like Jermaine Greer type thing.

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I mean, just absurd, caricature.

But most of the men watching it, they know it's a caricature, but it's a thrill.

It's a real thrill in that transgression.

That's very adolescent.

I think Trump played into that.

He was a bit of a middle finger.

Trump was a very adolescent male figure in my view.

And so that sense of transgression, that's one thing.

I think the second thing is this sense of, okay, I just want misogyny.

I want backlash.

I want to feel angry.

I want to share in this misogynist anger against the fact that women are out to get us now and are being crushed, et cetera.

That's another one.

And then another one is, I'd really just want some help.

Like, how do I date?

How do I navigate this world?

What should I do?

Like advice, essentially.

So the, you know, the kind of the uncle, if you like, the advice column from the uncle or brother or cousin.

And actually, I think the consumers of some of these people are depending on, if they're especially a little bit older, are able to make some of those distinctions.

But I think more importantly, we should make those distinctions because, of course, if there are people out there who just really want to consume angry misogynist content, we should not try and replace that.

We should try and show why that's a very bad idea.

Transgression, well, you're always going to get that humor or whatever.

It's the third element.

It's the extent to which Peterson or Tate and or others are providing advice, honest conversation, feels like they're just being candid in their advising.

That's the bit we should try and replace in a way that is still recognizably masculine.

So the trick here is try and meet that part of the demand.

And that, I think, is doable.

I don't know how.

I don't have a how yet.

Maybe you do.

I think there's an actually interesting tension here because I think that decomposition is correct.

Going over to Joe Rogan, who's very interested in figures like that.

Lots of things people don't like about Joe Rogan,

but I don't consider Joe Rogan sort of simply malign in any way.

But is, again, if you listen to him, particularly back in the day when he built his audience, it's a lot of comedians.

It's a bit transgressive.

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It's a lot of stuff about weightlifting, a lot of stuff about mixed martial arts.
It's about how to be a person in a way.
It's like a men's magazine used to be before the men's magazines got more egalitarian.
And then you go over to Peterson and Tate and they both also have this self-improvement dynamic.
And one thing that's interesting in conversation with our conversation is I think a problem for the left
when trying to talk to this desire is the tendency to systematize problems, right?
Is a tendency to say, you know, if you're struggling out there,
it's because we have designed schools poorly or the entire structure of the economy has moved
towards heal jobs
or we don't have enough vocational education.
And I mean, this is a problem you point out with the right.
It is extremely individualistic in the way it responds to these problems, right?
The famous Jordan Peterson, you know, clean your room, make your bed advice.
But also people live life as individuals and they want to hear something they can do now.
And they want somebody who empowers them now.
And one of my observations, I think there's a turn against self-help language on the left.
I don't think it's true everywhere. I can think of counter examples here, particularly for women.
But I do think there is in general a kind of pushing against the individualization of problems,
this kind of player-self-help by your bootstraps.
But if you give up on that, I think you also give up on very deep human yearning.
And so funnily enough, I think that the kind of figure you would need to answer the problem you're
talking about
is also a figure who is somehow very, very different than the systematic analysis that runs through
your book.
Yeah, that's so interesting.
I mean, what I think is there's maybe some middle ground here,
and it's where actually I've found myself moving, honestly,
since writing a book that's pretty wonky, right, deliberately so.
I think what you're alluding to is that there is a cultural problem here too,
which I think sits between this idea of like, oh, here's the public policy, here's the system, let's fix
the schools.
So they're better for boys.
And make your bed at the individual level, which is the sort of Petersonian thing.
And that intermediary is culture.
It's the relationships between people.
It's the way that boys learn to become men.
It's the institutions not just in the sense of like an institution, like a school delivering products,
but like the culture, the people around you, the people you see, the people you interact with.
And what I think now is that the cultural requirement to actually just have a straightforward
conversation
and to some extent not only tell but show a way of being masculine in a modern world.
And again, it's uncomfortable to think about.
I think that's important because kids especially and young people believe their eyes much more than

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their ears.

And so they do need to see it and hear it and to try and fill that space in a way that I think is lacking in a little bit in our institutions.

And so one of the reasons, for example, why I care about the lack of male teachers in schools is not just because of the studies showing the boys will get better grades.

It is because when you don't have male teachers in schools, you don't have male coaches in schools.

And you don't have men around the boys for the boys to see and just see how they're being.

I think about my own English teacher who was a Korean War veteran and managed to get a bunch of 16-year-old working-class boys to be tearful over 17th century love poetry.

That's a tough thing to do with a bunch of...

But he did it part and I'm sure it's part because he was a man.

And he was showing us that he could be both obviously masculine in various ways that we could either say is a problem or not.

But also, by the way, we can still read Andrew Marvell and find it very moving.

Hey, guys, look, I'm doing that.

I'm not just telling you that you can be like that.

I'm showing you that you can be like that.

And I don't know exactly where this leads me, but I do think that what Tate and others are doing is they're filling a cultural gap

and that it's a mistake on the left to think that we don't need places and spaces where boys learn to become men,

especially from other men in our families, in our communities, in our schools, in our churches and synagogues, our scout group.

Take your pick.

But my basic point is that especially masculinity doesn't invent itself.

And so if we think it needs to be, it does need to be to some extent created,

then we need to do some of the creating and not leave that to the people who are online.

That's the vacuum I think Tate and other figures fill because like you can consume the Tate content.

That's the most horrible misogynist stuff, but if you watch a lot of it and I've watched a lot of it now, there's some really good stuff in there and I'm afraid even to say that out loud because it's like, what? Andrew Tate said something good?

And the answer is, yeah.

Like an example, someone called into a show he was doing says,

I'm very short and I know that women prefer tall men.

What should I do?

And what Tate basically said was, look, mate, you've got to deal the cards you're dealt.

Get yourself in good shape, get yourself sorted out, try and dress, but whatever.

He just said, that's just the way it is.

He didn't win, she didn't say, and most importantly, he didn't start blaming women for preferring taller men.

He just said, that's the way it is.

Let me help you make the best of it.

And I just, I watched that clip and thought, that's pretty good actually.

And so why is it only Tate right now that's having those conversations?

And I don't think we should necessarily try and replace it on the internet, but instead where it leads me to think is, yeah, more male teachers, please, more male scout leaders, please, more men in our churches, please, more men in our communities. Again, to quote the chatty work, more fathers in our neighborhoods, please, more men in roles where they can help boys to become boys without just, there isn't a curriculum for masculinity.

It's a culturally learned behavior.

And we've, I just think we've backed off that task too much.

I think it's a great place to end.

Always a final question.

What are three books you'd recommend to the audience?

Can I cheat and do one as a paper rather than as a book?

You can. I always have a good paper.

I know you do.

Of all people, I could say that too.

It's probably you, Ezra.

But then one paper I just kept turning back to over and over again is a paper.

It's in the Journal of Economic Perspectives,

and it's called The Tenuous Attachments of Working Class Men.

And it's by Catherine Eden, Tim Nelson, Andrew Charlin, and others.

And it's just, it looks at the way in which the kind of some of the core anchors of male identity around work and family and community

and religious communities have just atrophied in four different cities.

It's just one of the best pieces of qualitative work that I've seen in this space.

And I just found myself going back to it over and over again.

It's just splendid work.

I hope they will turn it into a book.

I think they could call it the haphazard self,

which is the way they refer to what men are doing now.

I think it would be a great book.

The second book I'd recommend, which really gets at both the educational and labor market stuff, but actually more from looking at women.

I think you learn about men is Claudia Goldin's book, Career and Family,

which, as I said, I think Goldin is just absolutely the best in the business when it comes to looking at gender and education and labor market.

And she does it looking at women.

I actually talked to her at one point and I said, can I talk to you about men?

And she said, I don't know anything about men.

I only do women.

But actually, because she's talking about family and more generally about these institutions,

I actually sort of read Goldin's book and learned a lot about the other side of it that she claimed not to know anything about.

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And the third book I got a huge amount out of was a book by Anna Machen, who's an anthropologist.

I think maybe an evolutionary anthropologist at the University of Oxford.

And her book, maybe you'll know it actually as well, it's called *The Life of Dad, The Making of a Modern Father*.

It's a few years old now, but it's just a terrific book and it looks at the way in which kind of fatherhood kind of came into being as a result of some of the changes in our evolutionary history and makes, I think, just a very strong, progressive and humane case for the importance of fathers in the modern world.

And Richard Reeves, your book is of boys and men.

Thank you very much.

Thank you, Esmeralda.

The Ezra Clan just produced by Emethel Gawu, Annie Galvin, Jeff Gale, Brigitte Karma and Kristen Lin.

Backchecking by Michelle Harris, Mary March Locker and Kate Sinclair, mixing by Sonya Herrero.

Original music by Isaac Jones, audience strategy by Shannon Busta, the executive producer of New York Times, opinion audio by Andy Rose Strasser, and special thanks to Carol Saburo and Christina Samiluski.