

BOYS WILL BE

Boys need us to help free them from the tyranny of gender norms, too



Boys just want to have fun, too. (Reuters/Navesh Chitrakar)

SHARE



WRITTEN BY

[Marian Salzman](#)

October 06, 2017

When we talk about gender rights or gender equality, we invariably focus on girls and women. And that makes sense. It's the female sex that for too long had been held back, denied even the most basic rights and opportunities, and constricted within a far smaller sphere than historically has been available to boys and men. And even in 2017, females in many ways and many places continue to be subject to suffocating social norms, biases, and discriminatory laws and actions. In more progressive parts of the world, women are typically considered the equals of men, but that notion has yet to translate to equitable paychecks or positions of power.

Clearly, more work needs to be done to achieve true gender equality. I would argue that an essential next step is to shift a significant part of our focus to boys. After all, they hold up half the sky, and they have benefited far less from evolving gender norms in the past half century than have girls. Think about it: Girls can act "like boys" with relative impunity. They can wear jeans and T-shirts, play sports, go after jobs in traditionally male professions and be cheered on for their efforts. But a boy in a dress? A young man who wants to be a doula or preschool teacher? Yes,

we've seen all three, but the males who pursue these nontraditional paths typically pay a steeper price than do females who wish to enter male bastions. Just ask Liev Schreiber, who had the audacity to allow his young son to accompany him to San Diego's Comic-Con dressed as female superhero Harley Quinn. Instagram erupted in protest. In the words of one enlightened soul, "Comeon (sic) Daddy. He's boy. Make him as a BOY." Added moaned: "Something is wrong with this picture sad sad sad just pure sadness."

The latest study from Havas backs up this extra bias felt by males: Only 14% of people in our 32-country survey said that a woman who doesn't wear makeup is not feminine enough. Meanwhile, 47% said a man who chooses to wear makeup isn't masculine enough.

Just as girls need to be given unfettered access to educational and career opportunities, boys need to be granted the freedom to explore their interests and desires—even those that don't conform to what has long been considered the masculine ideal.

Consumer brands have a role to play here—and a few are already lighting the way. In the same manner that Always has been working to boost girls' confidence with its #LikeAGirl campaign, Axe's #isitokforguys is exposing the pressure boys are under to behave "like men." Its message: Yes, it's OK to cry. It's OK to not be into sports. It's OK to dress and act in ways long considered "feminine." It's OK to be whoever you are.

That's an important message in a world that teaches boys at a very young age that it's better to show anger than sensitivity. That it's OK to destroy a toy but not OK to cry over a favorite plaything that someone else has broken. It's precisely those sorts of gender constrictions that the fashion consortium Clothes Without Limits is trying to break. You won't find them selling T-shirts with traditional messaging such as "Boys will be boys" and "Heartbreaker." Instead, their shirts are emblazoned with phrases such as "Kind like Daddy" and "Boys will be boys good humans!"

Children—boys and girls—are exposed to an onslaught of messages every day that tell them who they should and should not be. If we want to live in a society in which women are respected, men are permitted to display the full range of human emotions, and both genders are able to explore every opportunity without regard to outdated gender norms, then we have to get better about recognizing that the fight for gender equality can't just be about empowering girls. It also has to be about liberating boys.