

The Hidden Costs of Success: Rethinking the Gender Gap in Academics

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Girls are often seen at the front of the line for a participation credit, feminine names are typically the first in a long list on a group worksheet. Adolescent girls feel a more crushing pressure to excel in academics and extracurriculars than boys. Such a weight can significantly impact young girls' mental well-being and health. Where does the gender gap in performance come from? What does such a substantial difference look like in adolescent settings? What steps can be taken to close such a substantial gap? Girls are taught from an early age they are meant to "peace-keep" and go above and beyond academically in a sea of rowdy boys who do not shoulder the same expectations. Such ideals are remnants of earlier systems. In the mid 1800s, girls' education picked up pace with reformers like Catharine Beecher and Emma Willard leading the movement. These women argued that providing girls with a better education would help them to become better mothers and wives. Such ideas opened the door for women's education but also set the stage for girls' education to be domestic-focused. The 20th century oversaw a shift where women began to join the workforce and break out of their typical part as housewife or homekeeper. Women joined the workforce initially to provide support during World War II. Because women had never had such a massive and clear opportunity to insert themselves into fields typically dominated by men, the pressure to perform well and prove themselves was high. Such historical circumstances evolved into the modern stereotype that girls are more responsible, organized, and "good students," while boys are allowed more leeway to be restless or underperform. These gaps in performance can manifest in a multitude of ways. Teenaged girls often report higher GPAs compared to boys in their same grades. Overall, women are more

likely to engage in multiple extracurricular activities, aiming to build a well-rounded profile for college admissions. However such advantages do not come without a price. A longitudinal study on university students in Singapore revealed higher GPAs correlate with increased burnout and the pursuit of academic excellence or even perfection can have long term effects on student mental health. Female students report burnout levels about 15% higher than their male counterparts. The Journal of Adolescent Health also revealed that girls experience higher levels of stress in relation to academic performance which can lead to insomnia, anxiety and depression. Such intense practices among so many women can be detrimental to mental health and impactful long-term in areas other than academics. If average high school girls feel such mounting pressure to achieve, what's to say those feelings won't follow them to college and into their careers? Women are constantly aiming to prove themselves and make a place for themselves, whether that's in the classroom, in the lecture hall or in the office. If such unhealthy burnout habits are not curbed in adolescence, they can carry on into adulthood. Putting a stop to such generational and deeply ingrained habits is not a simple process. However, closing the gap is necessary if we desire an improvement in female mental health. A shift in classroom culture would be an incredible start. Teachers beginning to balance participation opportunities so girls are less pressured to lead every time can start the change. Additionally, promoting healthy expectations could lift the burden around outperforming is another excellent step. By creating more room for mistakes, the mounting tension around academics will be reduced for all genders. Finally, broadening the definition of success means recognizing creativity, collaboration, and emotional well-being as equally valuable as grades or accolades. By shifting this cultural mindset, we can reduce harmful pressure on girls and create a healthier academic environment

for all students. This change can begin in our society, it just needs a kickstart.