



The gender gap in reading: Boy meets book, boy loses book, boy never gets book back

Why do boys and men read fewer books, and less often, than girls and women?

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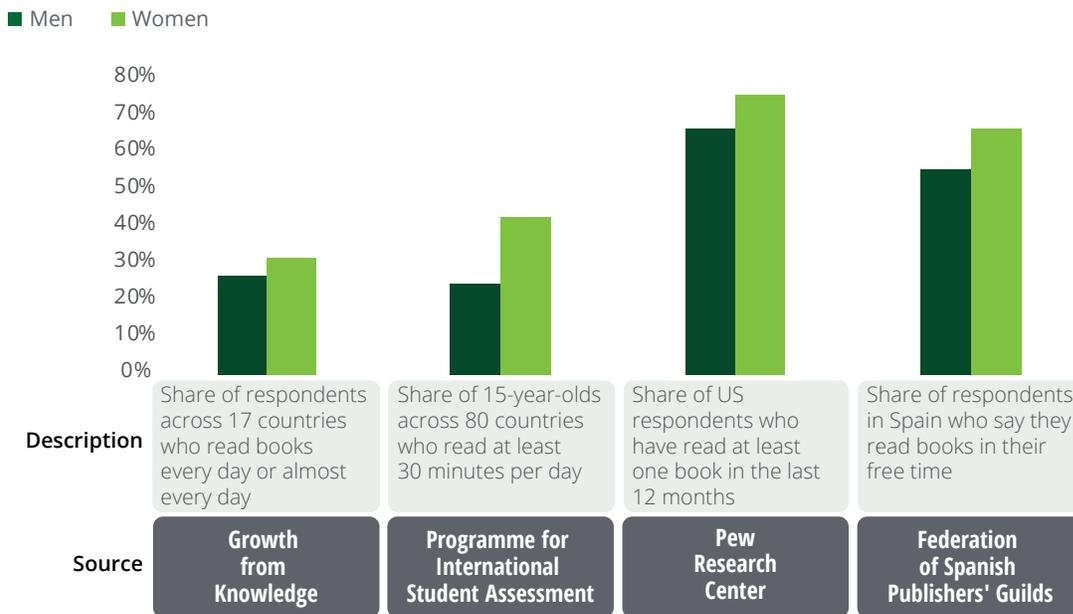
FIRST THE GOOD news: Partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world are reading more print books, e-books, and audiobooks than ever before.¹

Now the bad news: Boys and men are, and historically have been, less drawn to this activity (figure 1). This trend persists despite global illiteracy impacting women more than men.² In the

coming year and beyond, Deloitte Global predicts that boys and men in almost every country will continue to spend less time reading books, and read them less frequently, than girls and women. That is, the story will not diverge too much from the usual plotline. We're not saying that this gender divide will widen significantly ... but neither does it appear to be shrinking.

FIGURE 1

Women (and girls) outpace men (and boys) in the global book reading divide



Note: This data is from four different sources and years and is not meant to be directly comparable. Sources: Growth from Knowledge, *Frequency of reading books*, March 2017; Andreas Schleicher, *PISA 2018 insights and assessments*, OECD, 2019; Andrew Perrin, "One-in-five Americans now listen to audiobooks," Pew Research Center, September 25, 2019; Porter Anderson, "Spain's publishers cite rising readership, digital reading 'more intensive,'" *Publishing Perspectives*, January 22, 2019.

Boys and men are disadvantaging themselves by reading books less often

When we talk about a reading gap throughout this piece, we are referring specifically to the gap in reading long-form content: books rather than news articles and other shorter texts. You might think it doesn't matter—reading is reading, right?

Wrong. Studies show that people who read books not only live longer than people who don't read books, but also have a longevity advantage compared to those who read newspapers or magazines—even after adjusting for covariates such as age, education level, wealth, and health.³

Multiple studies also show that reading fiction books increases empathy and understanding of others more than reading nonfiction.⁴

So why is book reading more prevalent among women than among men? Several converging factors are likely behind the disparity. Reading habits are often formed in childhood and adolescence, and studies show that fathers are less likely to read themselves, which means that at a formative stage, children are less exposed to male reading role models. Fathers of sons are also less likely to read to them than fathers of girls.⁵ In addition, men and teenage boys are more likely than women and teenage girls to choose other entertainment activities, such as gaming, over reading.⁶

In addition to reading substantially less than girls, boys also report enjoying reading less. A 2018 study of children at age 15 found that more than 40% of girls reported reading at least 30 minutes a day, compared to only about a quarter of boys who did the same. The same study found that 44% of girls said that reading was one of their favorite hobbies, while only 24% of boys said the same.⁷

We predict that this gender divide in ability isn't going away, and won't until boys and men start reading as much and as often as girls and women do.

The really bad news is that there is also a gender gap in reading ability and comprehension, perhaps unsurprising if boys and men are getting less practice. One global study found that fourth-grade girls had higher average

reading achievement levels in almost all of the 50 countries surveyed than boys in the same grade—a trend that has held since 2001 (figure 2).⁸ We predict that this gender divide in ability isn't going away, and won't until boys and men start reading as much and as often as girls and women do.

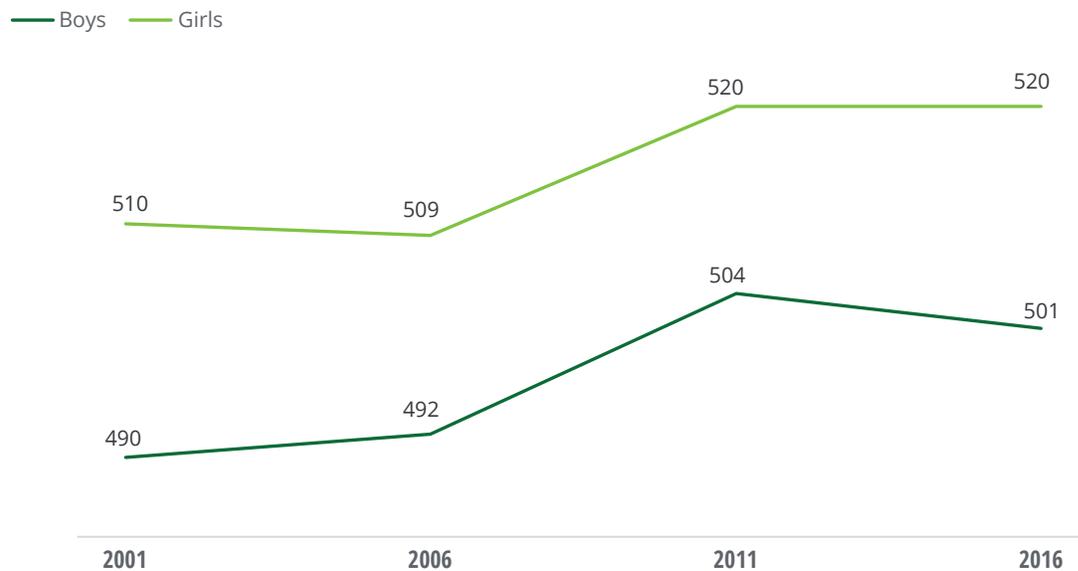
Interestingly—and perhaps importantly—men and boys read fewer books written by women. A study by Nielsen Book Research found that, of the 10

bestselling male authors, readership was roughly evenly divided by gender, with 55% male readers and 45% female readers. In contrast, only 19% of the 10 bestselling female authors' readers were

FIGURE 2

Internationally, girls continue to score higher than boys in reading achievement

PIRLS reading literacy scores among fourth-grade students in multiple countries



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *Progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS)*, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016.

male, compared to 81% female.⁹ Men also read fewer books with female protagonists than do women—a problem compounded by the fact that fewer books feature female protagonists overall. For example, in the top 100 children’s books, male characters (human and nonhuman) in leading roles outnumber female characters two to one.¹⁰

There is also a long history of women writers masking their gender—including the author of the wildly popular *Harry Potter* novels, Joanne Rowling, who writes under the gender-neutral moniker J. K. Rowling—in an effort to be taken seriously and attract a wider share of readers.¹¹ (However, more recently, some male authors have done the same and adopted gender-neutral pen names, in hopes of gaining more credibility with women and increasing their female readership).¹²

Not only does reading fewer books hurt men and boys, but not reading books by and about women can hurt society. If female book characters are portrayed largely through the gaze of men, or with a male lens, this can reinforce a lack of understanding of, and discrimination against, underrepresented and non-male groups. Reading books, especially fiction, is related to social acuity, helping readers learn about other people and comprehend their motivations.¹³ When we read, we put ourselves in the characters’ shoes to see their points of view, fears, hopes, and experiences. For female authors and protagonists to be a closed book to many male readers can be unhelpful in an era where we strive for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. Not to mention that capabilities developed by reading—including emotional intelligence, empathy, and imagination—are in high demand in the workplace and will likely be critical to employability in the future of work.¹⁴

THE BOTTOM LINE

The gender reading gap impacts not only men and boys—and their enjoyment of reading and their reading comprehension and ability—but society as a whole. To shrink it, book publishers can think about how to appeal to their male customers through both content and format. There may be an opportunity, for instance, for publishers and production studios to work together to adapt popular action-movie franchises and video game worlds, especially those that largely appeal to boys and men, into children’s books, young adult novels, and other reading or audiobook formats. Diversifying book formats may also help to shrink the gender reading gap. For instance, audiobooks may be leveling the playing field between men and women, with some research suggesting that men consume audiobooks about as much,¹⁵ if not more,¹⁶ than women. Publishers and content creators could utilize the audiobook format to better engage and reach male readers.

Ultimately, though, it’s up to parents, caregivers, and educators—and others on the front lines of child development—to actively work to encourage reading habits for both boys and girls equally. Providing boys with positive role models for reading, such as dads, coaches, and athletes, and identifying writers and characters boys can relate to may be a good place to start.¹⁷

LITERACY EQUITY GOES BEYOND THE READING GENDER GAP

Boys and men reading fewer books and spending less time reading is not the only concern associated with books and reading. Female characters are underrepresented as main characters in books,¹⁸ but so are certain other racially and ethnically diverse populations.¹⁹ Yet equitable representation in books (as well as in digital media such as television, movies, and video games) is critically important, especially for children. When children don't see people like them represented, or see harmful depictions of people who are like them, they can suffer negative long-term outcomes, including lower self-esteem.²⁰ Content creators and distributors such as publishing companies and production studios have an opportunity to advance literacy parity because they can directly influence the content available in the market. Though there has been some progress in this area,²¹ expanding how racial and gender diversity is represented in books and other formats can be key to providing positive role models for children regardless of their racial or ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.

Publishers, too, have a role to play in how they market their products. Books are generally marketed in gendered ways. Children's books about princesses, mothering, and romance are typically targeted toward girls and women, whereas books about superheroes, science fiction, and horror are typically marketed to boys and men. What if, instead of focusing on gender, publishers and content creators targeted consumers by their interests and preferences? Steps like these can be essential if books are to reflect and encourage the kind of equitable society that many of us want to create.

Broadening the discussion still further, governments and corporates alike have an opportunity to tackle the challenge of increasing literacy globally. Though most governments invest in their education systems, expenditure on education globally was less than 4% of global GDP in 2019—with some countries investing far more resources on education than others.²² Raising the bar on education funding and pursuing parity across nations should be a priority moving forward. In the private sector, corporations could use their lobbying power and capital to support and fund education and literacy initiatives nationally and internationally. For instance, such funding could support more initiatives that get books and e-readers—and literacy instruction—into the hands of more youth and adults across the globe. Initiatives that work to distribute books to children, such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library²³ and Marcus Rashford's Book Club, are examples of foundations and partnerships tackling the issue of childhood literacy.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions to this chapter:

Lottie Hayton, Jukka-Petteri Suortti, and William Yarker.

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