

Claims Surrounding the Feminization of Higher Education: A Form of Misogyny

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In a recent opinion piece published by the National Post, Leigh Revers, a university professor in the department of chemical and physical sciences at the University of Toronto, criticizes the ‘feminization of higher education.’¹ Leigh Revers holds a position of authority being a professor in a well accredited institution which makes his opinion piece very impactful at the expense of women seeking higher education. This paper argues that the phenomenon of misogyny in higher education exists and has occurred on a wider scale than just Revers’ article. Research by Morley helps to frame this debate as a crisis rather than as singular events.² I argue that Revers’ writing provides an example of misogynistic policing in higher education and Manne’s ameliorative account helps to name

¹Leigh Revers, “Leigh Revers: The dark side of the feminization of higher education.” *National Post* (14 October 2024).

²Louise Morley, “Misogyny posing as measurement: disrupting the feminisation crisis discourse.” *Contemporary Social Science*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2011).

the misogyny.³ In taking Manne's account of misogyny as a law enforcement tool of the patriarchy, one which works to police women, we can see that hostility towards women involved in higher education is an attempt to enforce gendered norms.⁴

I will begin the paper with an outline of Manne's ameliorative account of misogyny.⁵ I will then outline the article written by Leigh Revers and his position that higher education has become feminized, using his writing as an example of misogyny.⁶ I will tie in the research by Morley to explain the feminization debate on a larger scale and how Manne's account helps us to see it as a pervasive issue rather than an individual example.⁷ I will combat arguments made in favor of Revers' writing, specifically that he is just stating statistical facts. I will conclude by returning to Manne's account to highlight how it is beneficial in naming acts of misogyny in the system of higher education but it is limited in its ability to find a solution. Here I will connect chapter ten from Manne's work *Entitled* to her ameliorative account which provides a solution to the issue.⁸

In Kate Manne's work *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, she develops an ameliorative account of misogyny arguing that her account will be more useful than what she calls the 'naive conception' of misogyny.⁹ The naive conception argues that misogyny is "primarily a property of individual agents [...] who are prone to feel hatred, hostility, or other similar emotions toward any and every

³Kate Manne, "Down Girl," *Oxford Academic* (2017).

⁴Manne, "Down Girl," 63.

⁵Manne, "Down Girl."

⁶Revers, "The dark side of the feminization of higher education."

⁷Morley, "Misogyny posing as measurement."

⁸Kate Manne, "Entitled," *Brightspace* (2020).

⁹Manne, "Down Girl" 60.

woman [...]”¹⁰ In her eyes, where the naive conception fails is in its focus on psychology and problems of epistemology.¹¹ Similarly to Manne, I view this account as limiting in its focus on the individual disposition of the person perpetuating misogyny. Manne argues that misogyny can occur even if the perpetrator does not feel hatred towards women.¹² She states that misogyny is more of a political phenomenon than a psychological one.¹³ The political nature of misogyny is evident in Revers’ argument as he is attempting to gatekeep an institution from women that would provide them socio-political advancement.

In contrast, Manne’s ameliorative account is an attempt to remedy the aforementioned limitations she saw. Manne argues that misogyny is the “‘law enforcement’ branch of a patriarchal order, which has the overall function of policing and enforcing its governing ideology.”¹⁴ The social forces of misogyny, in Manne’s view, target women for the actual or perceived violations of established patriarchal norms.¹⁵ Manne describes how it is expected that those who act in misogynistic ways would simultaneously have psychological issues.¹⁶ Yet the focus on psychologism is limited in helping us know how to remedy the impact that misogyny leaves on women, and in turn, it takes women out of the account. In describing misogyny as a policing and enforcing tool of the patriarchy, Manne effectively remedies the issue of psychological effects that are present in the naive account. We should be emphasizing the effects of misogyny on women instead of what men are feeling

¹⁰Manne, “Down Girl,” 33.

¹¹Manne, “Down Girl,” 60.

¹²Manne, “Down Girl,” 39.

¹³Manne, “Down Girl,” 33.

¹⁴Manne, “Down Girl,” 63.

¹⁵Manne, “Down Girl,” 63.

¹⁶Manne, “Down Girl,” 59.

when they decide to act in misogynistic ways. This argument from Manne is beneficial as it shifts focus from the mentality of men to a more broad sociopolitical analysis. Manne's ameliorative account of misogyny is useful in that it frames the patriarchy as a pervasive entity in our society, rather than merely the emotions of a few men.

Leigh Revers recently wrote an opinion piece for the National Post called, *The dark side of the feminization of higher education*. In this article Revers goes on a disorganized rant about why he believes higher education has become "[...] matriarchal enterprises run by women for women, in pursuit of retribution for the patriarchy of the past."¹⁷

Even in the very opening he states that the patriarchy is something of the past, when the recency of this article signals it is very much alive and well today. He begins his argument by claiming that having an increased female population in the university setting is a direct issue for the already declining fertility rates in the west.¹⁸ University, in his mind, is a space for "[...] star-crossed coupling across campuses." Without an equally gendered environment there can not be coupling on campuses, nevermind the existence of the LGBTQ+ community as they do not provide relief for the dropping fertility rate that Revers expresses such concern for.

As Revers is a professor, he provides evidence from his own teaching field to concur that there are more women than usual in male dominated spaces. Revers references an image that was taken of the current students studying Management and Innovation at the University of Toronto, using it as a guide for how many women are in the program. He claims that it is 50 percent more than what

¹⁷Revers, "The dark side of the feminization of higher education."

¹⁸Revers, "The dark side of the feminization of higher education," para. 2.

is normally expected.¹⁹ He goes on to argue how the traditionally masculine degrees have now been overrun by women. Revers states that “[...] there are gender-linked personality traits that attract men and women to different professions. But management and innovation? Surely one would expect much the opposite. Then again, down with the patriarchy!”²⁰ Revers continues his bio-essentialist reasoning as explanation for gender specific degrees. According to Manne’s ameliorative account it makes sense that Revers is acting out misogynistically because he is attempting to reinforce the laws of the patriarchy. Women are taking up space that he believes rightfully belongs to men.

As a result of the overly female population in male degree pathways, Revers believes this has led to men staying away from their typical fields of study.²¹ He attempts to explain the reason behind men being a less dominant population in the university setting. Revers cites “[t]he pervasive and now deeply entrenched culture of kindness, empathy and academic limp-wristedness [...] is anathema to the young, testosterone-charged male psyche, governed as it is by genetically embedded tendencies for boundary-pushing and risk-taking.”²² As a result of the overly empathetic educational system men no longer want to take part in such an environment as it does not provide a challenge to their “testosterone-charged male psyche.” If we take Revers’ writing to be a valid argument then we could raise a counter question, is tolerance of a system that functions outside of one’s own expertise not a challenge to these young men? Revers argues that the feminization of higher education is problematic to fertility rates, has led to increased numbers

¹⁹Revers, “The dark side of the feminization of higher education,” para. 6.

²⁰Revers, “The dark side of the feminization of higher education,” para. 7.

²¹Revers, “The dark side of the feminization of higher education,” para. 8.

²²Revers, “The dark side of the feminization of higher education,” para. 9.

of women in male dominated fields and caused men to no longer attend university.

The debate surrounding the feminization of higher education is not limited to the article written by Revers, but also exists in wider academic literature. I argue that research by Louise Morley helps to highlight the debate as a wide phenomenon, along with Manne's ameliorative account of misogyny proving that this is a pervasive issue. The very fact that Morley's research was published in 2011 and Revers had just recently published his opinion piece in 2024, provides an example that this debate regarding education's feminization has been a long standing one. Morley argues that the feminization debate is partial and exclusionary. She clearly defines five reasons why she believes the debate to be limiting.²³ She argues that it limits women to low roles in education, it is debatable whether quantitative change has even allowed for women to have more space in universities, it lacks intersectionality, it confuses the terms sex and gender, and finally, it reinforces the gender dichotomy that when one group is up another group must be down. I believe this last argument to be the most prominent in not just Revers' writing but also in the feminization debate on a wider scale.

Women's engagement in higher education is assumed to be lowering men's dominant status simultaneously. Morley cites multiple studies that have perpetuated the feminization debate in their research, which signals to us that this is not a one off argument made by some people in some places, but rather a global debate on the topic. Morley analyzes the HEPI report, a report based in the UK.²⁴ The report analyzes "[...] male and female participation and

²³Morley, "Misogyny posing as measurement," 227.

²⁴Morley, "Misogyny posing as measurement," 228.

progression in higher education [...] and concludes that we need to change the mindset that continues to see males as advantaged and females as disadvantaged."²⁵ Not only does this report maintain the gender dichotomy, when one group is dominant the other must be beneath, but it also describes these gender differences as solvable through cognitive changes.²⁶ Further the report argues that "[...] a ceiling needs to be set on women's current success by assuming it must have come about by disadvantaging men." This report, despite being a formal academic source, is perpetuating the very same feminization debate that we saw in the very current article by Revers. The only difference is that the report was published in 2009 and is based in the UK. This gives us evidence to the global and phenomenal aspects of the feminization debate.

I would like to connect Manne's account to the pervasiveness of the feminization debate. Manne's ameliorative account argues that misogyny working as the law enforcement tool of the patriarchy "[...] has the overall function of policing and enforcing its governing ideology."²⁷ Seeing as the patriarchy is a large structure under which we all exist, it is nearly impossible that women could avoid misogynistic backlash when they participate in any setting outside of their prescribed domain. I believe that universities are synonymous with power and status, therefore women are attempting to obtain something that they are not entitled to under patriarchy. Misogyny will always be required to police women out of the spaces they do not belong, in this case it is higher education. As long as the patriarchy exists, so will the misogyny in higher education and the feminization debate will flourish.

²⁵Morley, "Misogyny posing as measurement," 228.

²⁶Morley, "Misogyny posing as measurement," 228.

²⁷Manne, "Down Girl," 63.

I will now combat Revers' assertion that it is factual that universities have become female dominated. It is quite possible that some may see Revers' point, after all he is providing statistics from known sources. Revers describes how, "[i]n the United States, women have long been outpacing men in college graduation, with the proportion of 25-34 year old females holding a bachelor's degree eclipsing males in the same age category as far back as the mid-1990s. For the academic year that began in the fall of 2021, Statistics Canada reported that enrolment of women was a full 18 percentage points — almost a whole quintile — ahead of men."²⁸ Revers cites Pew Research Center in his argument that women have been outpacing men in college graduation for a while now. This may be true, however Revers argues for a different conclusion as to why this is than the conclusion I came to. When I looked into the source on my own I found many other facts of information that had been conveniently left out by Revers. Pew Research Center highlights how a third of men who did not get a bachelor's degree just 'did not want to' while women's main reasons are that they (a) could not afford it and (b) that they had the responsibility to support their families financially. In each of these two causes, men were statistically lower than women in citing this as a reason for not getting a bachelor's degree.²⁹ In Revers' writing he leaves out the reasons that were given by both men and women on why they did not get a bachelor's degree. Instead Revers begins by stating the fact that women are outpacing men and concludes that it is because men's testosterone is not being challenged in a feminized environment. When women don't attend it is due to structural restrictions, how-

²⁸Revers, "The dark side of the feminization of higher education," para. 5.

²⁹Kim Parker, *What's behind the growing gap between men and women in college completion?*, Pew Research Center (2021, November 8): para. 3.

ever, when men do not attend it is due to the fact that they did not want to or did not need to for the career they wanted. Revers ignores that the data proves that women face higher systemic challenges in accessing education than men do.

Revers goes on to cite Statistics Canada as a source for women's enrollment rates in comparison to men, women's being 18% higher. Again Revers is using a source that is intended to display the gender diversity in Canada's higher education, yet he takes the statistics and uses them as proof that something sinister is going on. When looking at the numbers, men make up 40.80% of the population in higher education while women make up 58.56%.³⁰ The numbers are incredibly close which in my opinion does not signal cause for concern. Despite this difference being very slim, only 17.76%, Revers is troubled now that women are in larger numbers than men. In my opinion there is only cause for concern when the discrepancy is larger. For example if women were leading in educational enrollment by 35% or higher there would be a need for increased research on why this is occurring. Yet Revers is only truly concerned by the fact that men are no longer outnumbering women in educational attainment.

Revers is only raising the alarms and calling out women in the education system in an attempt to enforce women back into their patriarchal order. This directly correlates to Manne's establishment of misogyny as the law enforcement tool. Society and the higher education system has been built by men for men, thus Revers feels entitlement to the space and takes up a sense of victimhood when women take what he sees as men's rightful possession. Looking past these two examples of statistics which Revers has failed to critically and accurately analyze, the majority of his proof rests on infor-

³⁰Statistics Canada, *Gender diversity of Canadian postsecondary students*, (2021, June 25).

mation he has received from colleagues without a cited source for the claims he is making. To me this raises concern regarding how truthful he is being with the 'data' he has acquired from colleagues. With the absence of sources for what he claims, it requires readers to be wary of his arguments. While Revers uses statistics, he does not analyze the data accurately and simultaneously he uses information he has received from colleagues, therefore, I argue that his writing can not be taken as fact without a deeper analysis of the claims.

In Manne's ameliorative account of misogyny, while I find it beneficial in naming examples of misogyny, she leaves us without a solution in her initial work *Down Girl*.³¹ In the concluding chapter of *Down Girl* called "The Giving She," Manne states "[...] I give up. I wish I could offer a more hopeful message. Let me close just by offering a postmortem."³² Here, after leading her readers through her ameliorative account of misogyny, Manne quickly abandons her audience leaving them with a postmortem. Manne goes on to give an overview of the many themes she has discussed in her work. Her ameliorative account of misogyny is useful in that it helps to frame misogyny as something pervasive through the patriarchy's existence, without need for feelings of hatred, and as something that acts to police women. Where Manne's account fails is that we are now left with a strong understanding of misogyny as it acts yet we do not know what to do to prevent or solve its effects.

I argue that Manne remedies her previous conclusion in her newer work called *Entitled*, which acts as a continuation of her original account of misogyny. Specifically, I will centre on chapter 10 of *Entitled* called, "Undesparing - On the Entitlement of Girls." Manne

³¹Manne, "Down Girl."

³²Manne, "Down Girl," 300.

opens the chapter by directly addressing how she finished Down Girl. Manne states “[...] I concluded by offering a postmortem-a grim overview of the reasons I was pessimistic about getting people to take the problem of misogyny seriously, or even to face it as a problem whatsoever.”³³ She continues by stating that since she finished Down Girl she has changed, while still not being entirely hopeful, she is less pessimistic. Manne determines that she was confusing “[...] intransigence of some people with the unwillingness of most people to think soberly and deeply about the problems facing girls and women.”³⁴ Her pessimistic outlook stemmed from conflating a minority of people who are opposed to changing misogyny with most people who are merely unengaged. The Latter, as I see it, has the capability of change while the other group simply does not want to change. After making this connection and reflecting on her past mistakes, Manne attempts to redeem herself.

In a manifesto style, she offers actionable ‘entitlements’ that girls must be taught that they are allowed to have. Manne declares that she wants her daughter to “[...] be clear about her entitlements, and to be prepared to assert them when conditions make that possible. And when they do not, I want her to feel lucid anger, and to push for structural changes [...]”³⁵ Here we find the crux of Manne’s claim, she is writing this manifesto in order to have women and girls feel entitled to what the patriarchy has denied them of and to use their anger as power towards creating structural change. Manne lists the things her daughter should know she is entitled to: bodily autonomy, to change her gender presentation, to enjoy and use her body, to her sexuality, to speak her mind, to not have to tailor her body for

³³Manne, “Entitled,” 184.

³⁴Manne, “Entitled,” 184.

³⁵Manne, “Entitled,” 187.

other people, and finally she is entitled to be powerful. The most useful claim for our purposes is the entitlement to speak her mind. Manne describes how “...studies show that in the classroom, boys continue to be called on vastly more than girls—a pattern that is particularly entrenched in STEM fields.”³⁶ This is a key root in the educational misogyny Revers is exemplifying. Due to educational misogyny women are left feeling unentitled to their knowledge or more broadly their space in the institution. In *Entitled*, Manne is giving an actionable list of things that we must teach our daughters that they are entitled to.

I believe it is important to use Manne’s ameliorative account of misogyny in order to understand the debate surrounding the feminization of higher education. It is also important in order to call out misogyny in cases like Revers’ writing which is an explicit misogynistic rant. This issue is not an isolated one, and has been getting called out in academia for years, since 2011 at the very least which was evident in Morley’s research. It is also not an issue that is secluded within Canada but instead has also been an issue in the UK, as outlined by Morley. I countered arguments in favor of Revers by analyzing the statistics he provided in his argument. I concluded that while men may be attending university in smaller numbers than women, what is left out is that women face higher systemic barriers to education than men. When he is not inaccurately referencing data, Revers uses anecdotal evidence without proper sources. I then returned to Manne’s account to highlight its limits in providing actionable solutions to misogyny. I see her more recent work *Entitled* as an extension of her original account, this time providing us with entitlements that girls should be taught they deserve to have.

³⁶Manne, “Entitled,” 190.

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