

## Teen Girls Are Struggling. They Need Our Help

By Nancy Jo Sales, *The Guardian*, February 28, 2023

Teenage girls are in crisis, and have been for some time. Even before the pandemic, many studies charted rising rates of depression, suicidal ideation and suicide in girls.

5 A stream of thinkpieces are asking what lies behind girls' unhappiness. Some blame social media. Others cite sexual violence: the CDC's recently released Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that girls are experiencing an increase – with 14% of them the victims of forced sex, a figure at least three times higher than for boys.

10 But it's not hard to see how social media and a rise in misogyny are, in fact, related. Social media sites trap girls in spirals questioning their attractiveness and self-worth. They're encouraged to compare themselves to others and seek approval for the way they look, while reinforcing beauty standards that favor thinness and whiteness. They feel pressured to promote themselves as objects. There have been many studies establishing all this over about the last ten years, including Facebook's own research into girls and Instagram – research that the company suppressed until exposed by whistleblower Frances Haugen in 2021. "Teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression," Facebook's study noted. "This reaction was unprompted and consistent across all groups."

15 Social Media has always betrayed a sexist bias. Now it has become a promoter of misogynistic content to teenagers. A 2022 investigation by the Guardian revealed that TikTok was pushing celebrity misogynists such as Andrew Tate to male teen users.

20 The teen boys that teen girls encounter today are affected by this woman-hating online culture, as are girls themselves. As worried as we should be about girls' struggles with their mental health and well-being, we should be concerned about the rise in misogyny among boys.

When I interviewed girls for my 2016 book *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, almost every one of them had a story about the misogyny she'd encountered online – everything from having posts commented on in a disparaging, sexist way to having nude photos non-consensually shared.

25 What should we do? The CDC study said girls are "experiencing a level of trauma and distress that requires immediate action". The cost-benefit analysis is simply not in favor of girls using social media, where it seems as likely they'll be harmed as enriched. And to those who say that kids need social media to have friends, in-person friendships have been shown to be more meaningful for people of all ages. Not to mention the saved attention spans and increased number of books that will be read by girls whose parents protect them from the distraction of social media, which is designed to be addictive.

30 But there's more that schools and parents should be doing. Schools need to teach more about the history of women and girls. When boys know little of women's history, or how women have struggled for equality and basic rights, it's harder for them to understand their female counterparts and easier to fall prey to misogynistic messaging online. They have virtually no information with which to combat it, especially if they aren't growing up in households where women are respected. Alarming, the same goes for many girls.

35 Education, conversation, and increased restrictions on social media use are among what's needed to help girls at a time when their lives have become consumed with being online, where they are often treated very badly. And there are already signs that the misogynistic bias of technology is only going to continue with the advent of AI. Futurism recently reported that male users of the app Replika, which lets users create chatbots, are creating AI girlfriends and being verbally abusive toward them.

40 Do we really think the ability to mistreat female chatbots (and soon, female robots) won't have real world consequences – especially in the behavior of young men and boys who are increasingly isolated and divided from women and girls in real life, because they are spending the majority of their time online?