





Has a Man's World Become a Woman's Nation?

By Michael Kimmel

“**T**his is a man's world,” sang James Brown in 1964, with a voice both defiantly assertive and painfully anguished. He starts off proudly, with a litany of men's accomplishments: men made the cars, the trains, the electric lights and the boats that carried the loads and took us out of the dark. Men even made the toys that children play with. But lest he encourage only smug self-satisfaction, Brown changes course at the end of the song. “But it wouldn't be nothing...without a woman or a girl.” Without women, Brown ends, men are “lost in the wilderness...lost in bitterness...lost, lost,” his voice trailing off in confusion and despair.

This essay is about that wilderness 45 years later—a wilderness in which some men today are lost, others bitter, and still others searching for new forms of masculinity amid what they believe is the excessive feminization of American society and culture—not because of the absence of women in their lives that Brown noticed but rather, ironically, because of their increased presence. At work and at home, in private and in public, women's increasing equality has been an issue to which men have had to respond.

If women's entry into the labor force stirred up men's ability to anchor their identity as family provider, women's emergence as primary breadwinner is a seismic shift, shaking some men's identities to their foundations. Coupled with the equally seismic shift in the structure of the workplace, we see a major reason why many

contemporary observers see a “crisis” of masculinity—a general confusion and malaise about the meaning of manhood.

How have men responded? While some noisily and bitterly protest, and others continue to fight a rear-guard action to undo women’s gains, most American men simply continue to go about their lives, falling somewhere between eager embrace of women’s equality and resigned acceptance. And among this majority of American men, some interesting developments are now clear. These men by and large are closer to their wives and children and happier for the effort (as are their families), and they are healthier both physically and mentally. And yes, they have more sex.

Declaring America to be a woman’s nation, while deliberately provocative, does not mean we are, but just as surely it does mean we no longer live in a man’s world, underscoring a significant trend of the gradual, undeniable, and irreversible progress toward gender equality in every arena of American life—from the public sector (economic life, politics, the military) to private life (work-family balance, marital contracts, sexuality). Women have successfully entered every arena of public life, and today many women are as comfortable in the corporate boardroom, the athletic playing field, the legal and medical professions, and the theater of military operations as previous generations of women might have been in the kitchen.

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And they’ve done it amazingly fast. It is within the last half-century that the workplace has been so dramatically transformed, that the working world depicted in the hit TV show “Mad Men” (about Madison Avenue advertising executives in the early 1960s) looks so anachronistic as to be nearly unrecognizable. For both women and men, these dramatic changes have come at such a dizzying pace that many Americans are searching for the firmer footing of what they imagine was a simpler time, a bygone era in which everyone knew his or her place.

My father tells me that when he was in college, he and his friends would occasionally pose this question to each other: “Will you let your wife work?” And, he tells me, they all answered it in pretty much the same way. “She shouldn’t *have to* work. I should be able to support my family all by myself.”

Today, among my male students, the question itself is meaningless. They assume their wives will work, and certainly do not anticipate being asked to grant permission for their wives to do so. They expect to be part of a two-career couple, for financial, if not political, reasons.

The transformation of American public life prompted by these changes in women’s lives has of course had a profound impact on the lives of American men—whether or not they recognize it. Indeed, these changes have reverberated to the core of American manhood. Some of the responses receive disproportionate media coverage than their number might warrant. But a guy changing a diaper or drying a dish is far less media-genic than a bunch of Wall Street bankers drumming as they bond around a bonfire, or some deranged divorced dad dressed up as Batman and scaling a state capitol building to promote “fathers’ rights.”

I’ll try to map a range of men’s responses, but the evidence is clear that most American men are quietly acquiescing to these changes, with sweeping implications for our economy and our nation.

Real men provide for their families

Since the country’s founding, American men have felt a need to prove their manhood. For well over a century, it’s been in the public sphere, and especially

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Do you agree or disagree: Compared to your father, you are more comfortable having women work outside the home?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.

the workplace, that American men have been tested. A man may be physically strong, or not. He may be intellectually or athletically gifted, or not. But the one thing that has been non-negotiable has been that a real man provides for his family. He is a breadwinner.¹

A man who is not a provider—well, he doesn't feel like much of a man at all. Two general trends—structural and social—define the dramatic erosion of the foundation of that public arena for men, leading some men to their current malaise and confusion over the meaning of manhood. James Brown may have been right in 1964 that men made the boats, trains, cars, and electric lights. But the dramatic structural shifts that have accompanied globalization mean that there are very few cars, boats, trains—and even toys—being made domestically any longer.

In the past three decades, manufacturing jobs have been hardest hit as layoffs in the steel, automobile, and other brick-and-mortar industries downsized,

SEEKING HELP. Many men today are filing for unemployment insurance and taking care of their kids as they look for work. {JOE RAEDLE, GETTY IMAGES}



outsourced, cut back, laid off, and closed. Add to that the gradual erosion of our social safety net (health insurance, medical benefits, retirement and pension accounts, Social Security) instituted by the New Deal and we are now living in a new era of “social insecurity.” As one 62-year-old machinist told a journalist, “we went to lunch and our jobs went to China.”²

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This decline in manufacturing has been precipitous—and permanent. “Foreman says these jobs are going, boys, and they ain’t coming back,” sang Bruce Springsteen in “My Hometown”—a 1984 tune that resonates even more today as the Great Recession bleeds even more manufacturing jobs out of the U.S. workforce.

Heather Boushey, in her chapter in this report, also captures the anxiety experienced by blue-collar men of all races who are losing the majority of jobs in this recession and almost all men who are seeing their wages fall. These job losses and wage cuts narrow the gender gap in pay not because women are getting ahead but rather because traditional male-dominated industries are suffering.

Even in economic recovery, as President Obama observed, these jobs “will constitute a smaller percentage of the overall economy,” so that, as a result, “women are just as likely to be the primary bread earner, if not more likely, than men are today.”³ So the very foundations on which masculinity has historically rested have eroded; the entire edifice seems capable of collapse at any moment. Or so it seems to a variety of different types of men who rail against our changing society.

Lost in the bitterness

To some men, women's entry into the public arena is experienced not as “entry” but as “invasion.” The men who today oppose women's entry into firehouses and police stations, military combat units, and corporate boardrooms echo those who

opposed their entry into the Citadel and Virginia Military Institute, the Augusta Country Club, and the locker room a decade ago—men who themselves echoed those who opposed women’s right to vote, join a union, serve on a jury, drive a car, or enter the workforce a century ago.

Demographically, they range from younger working-class guys—firefighters and factory workers who sense greater competition for jobs—to middle-class, middle-aged corporate types who believe that the politics of women’s entry (affirmative action, an end to wage discrimination, comparable worth) hurt them. Both groups mourn the loss of the casual locker-room frivolity that marked the all-male workplace, and are afraid of, and angry about, sexual harassment guidelines, which they regard as the Politically Correct police. Most are white, and offer the same dire predictions—loss of camaraderie and casual cohesiveness—that whites feared 40 years ago about integration.

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Men who oppose women’s equality today often express a *defensive resistance*. They’re interested in preserving certain arenas as all-male havens. Women, we might be told, are not qualified for the positions they seek; they are not strong enough, not tough enough, not [fill in the blank] enough to make the grade. This defensive resistance lies close to the surface; a gentle scratch can elicit a furious response. “I will have none of the nonsense about oppressed and victimized women; no responsibility for the condition of women...none of the guilt or self-loathing that is traditionally used to keep men functioning in harness,” fulminates Richard Haddad, a champion of men’s rights.⁴

While researching my recent book, *Guyland*, I happened on a Brooklyn bar that has been home to generations of firefighters and their pals. There’s an easy ambience about the place, the comfort of younger and older guys (all white) sharing a beer and shooting the breeze. Until I happen to ask one guy about female firefighters. The atmosphere turns menacing, and a defensive anger spills out of the guys near me. “Those bitches have taken over,” says Patrick:



WOMEN FIREFIGHTERS. In 2008, women made up 4.1 percent of firefighters, but you wouldn't know it from firehouse conversations. {JUSTIN SULLIVAN, GETTY IMAGES}

They're everywhere. You know that ad 'it's everywhere you want to be.' That's like women. They're everywhere they want to be! There's nowhere you can go anymore—factories, beer joints, military, even the firehouse! [Raucous agreement all around.]⁵

Not long ago, I appeared on a television talk show opposite three such “angry white males” who felt they had been the victims of workplace discrimination. They were in their late twenties and early thirties. The show’s title, no doubt to entice a large potential audience, was “A Black Woman Stole My Job.” Each of the men described how they were passed over for jobs or promotions for which they believed themselves qualified.

Then it was my turn to respond. I said I had one question about one word in the title of the show. I asked them about the word “my.” Where did they get the idea



LEARNING FROM THEIR DAUGHTERS. Coaching girls sports teams is increasingly common among fathers, bringing daughters and dads closer together. (NICOLE BENVIGNO, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*)

it was “their” job? Why wasn’t the show called “A Black Woman Got a Job” or “A Black Woman Got *the* Job”? These men felt the job was “theirs” because they felt entitled to it, and when some *other* person (a black female) got the job, that person was really taking what was “rightfully” theirs.

That sense of entitlement—and entitlement thwarted—is what lies beneath the surface of these men’s resistance to women’s equality. These men employ what we might call a “wind chill” theory of gender politics: It doesn’t matter what the temperature actually is, it matters only how it feels. Gender equality is felt to be a zero-sum game: If women win, men lose. And to hear them tell it, men are losing.

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But they rarely just “tell it.” Urged on by anti-feminist media pundits, usually what we hear are screams. Just flip on virtually any talk radio station in America and listen to the callers as they rail against a system that no longer favors them. Eavesdrop on the myriad “men’s rights” groups that advocate for men as the new victims of reverse discrimination. Or tune into sports radio, the most gender-specific spot on your radio dial.

As women race onto the athletic field in record numbers, some men run off into sports talk. Once the domain of “real” men, the participation of women and girls in sports is one of our era’s most significant gender transformations. In 1971, fewer than 300,000 high school girls played interscholastic sports, compared with 3.7 million boys. By 2005, the participation of boys had increased by about half a million, but girls’ participation had soared to 2.9 million. But though women may play sports, they don’t tend to spend much time talking about them.

Sports talk radio often expresses the defensive male bonding that lies just below the surface of the easy camaraderie of that imagined locker room. Here’s how one regular listener explained it to communications scholar David Nylund:

*It's a male bonding thing, a locker room for guys in the radio. You can't do it at work, everything's PC now! So the Rome Show [Jim Rome is the most famous sports talk radio DJ] is a last refuge for men to bond and be men. . . I listen in the car and can let the maleness come out. I know it's offensive sometimes. . . but men need that!*⁶

Sometimes, this leads to some dizzying reversals of both conventional wisdom and common sense. Are feminists concerned about domestic violence? Proclaim “gender symmetry,” and then argue that women hit men as much as men hit women. Women concerned about sexual assault? “The way young women dress in the spring constitutes a sexual assault upon every male within eyesight of them,” wrote one retired professor. Women seek to protect their right to choose? Attempt to establish a “man’s right to choose,” and then prevent a woman from aborting “his” child while ignoring any responsibility for the child once born. Or how about women in the workplace campaigning against wage discrimination or sexual harassment? Insist that the wage gap favors women and that sexual harassment is actually an expression of women’s sexual power.⁷

In the eyes of these anti-feminist men’s rights groups, it’s no longer a man’s world. They share this report’s perception that America has become a woman’s nation. And, in their view, it’s time to take it back.

This anti-feminist political agenda is best, and most simply, made by Harvard political scientist Harvey Mansfield, in an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*. “The protective element of manliness is endangered by women having equal access to jobs outside the home,” he writes. “Women who do not consider themselves feminist nonetheless often seem unaware of what they are doing to manliness when they work to support themselves. They think only that people should be hired and promoted on merit, regardless of sex.”⁸

While it can’t be true that only feminists actually believe in meritocracy, some who would support men evidently want to keep that playing field as uneven as possible. That’s certainly what groups such as the National Organization for

Men, Men's Rights International, and others seek as they organize men around perceived injustices against men by the feminist cabal that supposedly now rules Washington. In the eyes of these anti-feminist men's rights groups, it's no longer a man's world. They share this report's perception that America has become a woman's nation. And, in their view, it's time to take it back.

The “masculinists”

To other men, women's increased empowerment only highlights the loss of masculine vigor among American men. Their response was not to attempt to roll back women's gains but rather to return to a nostalgic notion of masculinity, one rooted in ostensibly natural, primal, sacred, or mythic qualities. If women have invaded all the previously all-male institutions, men needed to find, as Virginia Woolf might have put it, “a room of their own”—an all-male space where men can relax with other men, free from the constant policing that accompanies political correctness, and retrieve their inner sense of their own masculinity, in the presence of other men. For these “masculinists,” gender politics are a project of reclamation, restoration, and retrieval—not of some lost power over women, but of a lost sense of internal efficacy and sense of power.

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In the last decades of the 20th century, thousands of middle-aged, middle-class white men found themselves literally “lost in the wilderness” as they trooped off dutifully on what were called “mythopoetic” retreats with poets such as Robert Bly and story-tellers such as Michael Meade. These “weekend warriors” sensed that men had lost their vitality, their distinctively male energy in a world of alienating office cubicles, yucky diaper-changing and sappy date movies.⁹

For masculinists, power is not about economic or political aggregates or different groups' access to resources. Nor is it to be measured by comparing wages or representatives on corporate boards or legislative bodies. Rather, power is an interior experience, a sense of dynamic energy. As a result, they tend not to engage with policy initiatives designed to push women back. At their best, they are indifferent to women's collective experience; they may even take inspiration from women's empowerment. They seek instead to combat their sense of emasculation not with impotent rage against feminized institutions, but rather by restoring their sense of power in reclaiming masculine myths.

THE PROMISE KEEPERS. Persuading men to find Jesus and take control of their families.
{MARC ASNIN, REDUX}



Other guys find that lost all-male Eden in cyberspace. While cinematic and pornographic fantasies of men's power have long been with us, the proliferation of video and computer games in which avatars wreak havoc on women, gays, and other “others” is still somewhat shocking. For significant numbers of younger men, remote corners of cyberspace are the newest incarnation of the Little Rascals’ “He-Man Woman Haters Club,” the tree house with the sign that says “No Gurls Allowed.”

These types of masculinists tend to rely on archaic notions of the essential, natural, and binary masculine and feminine. As a result, they may become momentarily enamored with anti-feminist policy initiatives, such as the re-segregation of schools into single-sex classes, ostensibly to promote boys’ engagement with education, but often to set back decades of feminist efforts to make classrooms and athletic fields more equal. (These anti-feminists are not to be confused with those popular voices in minority communities—backed by many policy analysts—all of whom are engaged with the crisis facing many *minority* boys in school, which is both real and serious.) For these mostly white masculinists, their zeal to support fathers’ connection with family life and especially with the experience of fatherhood often draws them into “angry dad” campaigns against custody or divorce laws, in which men are said to be the victims of reverse discrimination.

The most interesting arenas of contemporary masculinism, however, are in some of America’s churches. The most visible of these renewed revirilization efforts is the group Promise Keepers, which holds massive 50,000-to-75,000 men-only rallies in sports stadiums (because that’s where men feel comfortable gathering) with ministers (called coaches) and their assistants (dressed in zebra-striped shirts as if they were football referees) who seek to return men to the church.

Founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, former football coach at the University of Colorado, Promise Keepers is an evangelical Christian movement that seeks to bring men back to Jesus. Mostly middle class from the South and Midwest, they wed what you might think is a more “feminine” notion of evangelical Christianity—ideals of service, healing, and racial reconciliation—with a renewed assertion of men’s God-ordained position as head of the family and master of women. While mostly white, they have a real presence of African Americans in leadership positions.

In return for men keeping their promises to be faithful husbands, devoted fathers, and general all-around good men, the movement’s “bible,” “The Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper,” suggests that men deal with women this way:

MINDING THE FAMILY SINGLE-HANDEDLY.
Scott Elgin is raising his three-year-old daughter Emilie on his own in St. Petersburg, Florida after Emilie's mother developed a drug addiction.
{JULIA ROBINSON}

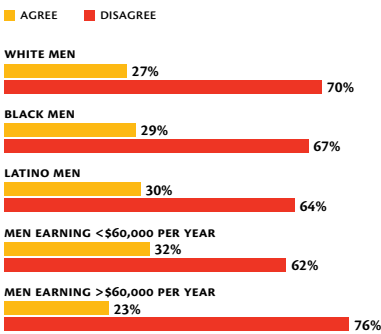




[S]it down with your wife and say ‘Honey I’ve made a terrible mistake. I’ve given you my role in leading this family and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role.’ . . . I’m not suggesting that you ask for your role back. I’m urging you to take it back. . . . There can be no compromise here. If you’re going to lead you must lead.¹⁰

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Do you agree or disagree: With the rise of women in society and the workplace, men no longer know their role?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.

Others have followed suit, from “The Power Team,” hyper-muscular zealots who pump up their gendered theology along with their biceps, performing such feats of strength as breaking stacks of bricks, to “J-B-C Men” who promise a “shock and awe” gospel and bonding at the movies (J-B-C stands for “Jesus - Beer - Chips!”). Or Seattle evangelist Marc Driscoll, who rails against the “Richard Simmons, hippie, queer Christ” offered by mainline Protestant churches.¹¹

The formal elements of the so-called “Masculinist Movement,” such as the Promise Keepers, have been predominantly white and upper- or middle-class.¹² Men of color, however, have also participated in the Movement in different ways, some formal and some less formal. The 1995 Million Man March was a formal (and for some, troubling) engagement with masculinist politics. As scholar Maurice Orlando Wallace described it, the march was “ambitious and unprecedented,” but it focused on the crisis of black America as one centered on “an embattled black masculinity,” which “provoked rigorous dissent from African American feminists” and others.¹³

To the new masculinists, it may no longer be a man’s world, but they’d like, at least, to find small pockets of all-male purity in which they can, again, be men among men.

Fatherhood as politics

After enumerating men's accomplishments in the workplace in his hit song, James Brown shifts his tone to a softer, more yearning, and plaintive tone. "Man thinks about a little baby girl, and a baby boy/ Man makes them happy,' cause man makes them toys." Here Brown signals the other defining feature of American manhood: fatherhood. After all, if one's identity is wrapped up in being a family provider, one has to have a family to provide for.

In the 21st century, reconnecting men to family life is politicized terrain, filled with moral urgency, legalistic outrage, and social movements. Some advocates of the "new fatherhood" paint with far broader strokes than simply enabling married couples to better balance work and family. David Blankenhorn's *Fatherless America* credited absent fathers with causing myriad social problems, ranging from juvenile delinquency, drug taking, sexual irresponsibility, crime and violence to unemployment. "Boys raised by traditionally masculine fathers generally do not commit crimes," Blankenhorn adds. "Fatherless boys commit crimes."¹⁴ His work was a catalog of specious correlations masquerading as causal arguments, but it struck a nerve about men's responsibility, or lack thereof.

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With divorce so common, one arena in which fatherhood has become highly politicized is during and after divorce. Many of the organizations promoting involved "fatherhood responsibility," especially in communities of color, seek to keep men engaged in family life because it's good for the children, good for women, and good for the men themselves. For other men, mostly white and middle class, the stroke of the pen finalizing divorce turns hordes of doting daddies into furious fathers who feel aggrieved by a process they believe denies them the access to their children to which they feel entitled.

These "father rights" guys blend easily into more general anti-feminist organizations in advocating for public policy reforms. Case in point: Fred Hayward, founder

of Men's Rights, Inc., argued that women were "*privileged* because they are more frequently *allowed* to raise children, while men are being *oppressed* by denial of access to children."¹⁵

Fathers' rights groups use a language of equality to exact their revenge against their ex-wives, their ex-wives' lawyers, and the entire legal system, demanding mandatory joint custody and an end to alimony and child support payments. "Society cannot take away a father's right to his children and expect him to cheerfully pay child support," writes one activist. "Society cannot expect a father to make enough money to support two separate households. Society cannot afford to support mothers who choose not to work."¹⁶ Fathers must have equal rights—the right to custody and the right to financial freedom without burdensome alimony and child support.

Well-documented racial disparities in enforcement of child support laws create a perception that some fathers are significantly more irresponsible, creating (or enabling) the very dynamics they are supposed to remedy.

In reality, the fathers' rights groups are tapping into a problem that very few men report having. Most parents get the custody arrangements they say they want, and while, all things being equal, the legal system does tend to privilege ex-wives' claims over ex-husbands' claims, all things are rarely, if ever, equal. In a recent study of 1,000 divorces in two California counties, for example, psychologist Eleanor Maccoby and law professor Robert Mnookin found that about 82 percent of mothers and 56 percent of fathers received the custody arrangement they wanted, while 6.7 percent of women and 9.8 percent of men requested more than they wanted and 11.5 percent of women and 34.1 percent of men requested less than they wanted.¹⁷

This suggests that "gender still matters" in what parents ask for and what they do to get it. That mothers were more likely to act on their desires by filing for a specific request also indicates that men need to ask for more up front to avoid feeling bitter later.¹⁸

But one consequence of current custody arrangements is paternal withdrawal. Whether this is because the father is bereft about losing regular contact with his children, or because once the marital bond is severed he considers himself to have escaped from a conflict-ridden family situation, it appears that many men “see parenting and marriage as part of the same bargain—a package deal,” write sociologists Frank Furstenberg and Andrew Cherlin. “It is as if they stop being fathers as soon as the marriage is over.”¹⁹

In one nationally representative sample of 11-to-16-year-old children living with their mothers, almost half had not seen their fathers in the previous 12 months. Indeed, we see a widespread “masculinization of irresponsibility”—the refusal of fathers to provide economically for their children, which has led to the “feminization of poverty,” with excruciatingly high poverty among single-mother families.

DIVIDING UP THE CHORES. Families today divide up the housework and the bill paying, but women continue to do more child care. {GARY KAZANJIAN, AP}



GENERAL



BUY
A CAR NOW

WHEN AMERICA MOVES, IT STARTS IN

DETROIT

ELLER

DETROIT

DETROIT

DETROIT

DETROIT

DETROIT



Well, the local union that I represent is in Flint. And one of the things that we saw as things were going on, obviously tensions rose as people were fearful for their jobs. And what we wanted to do was make sure that we responded in a way that would let them know that there were options. Because the feeling is the lack of options creates a desperation. And we did not want that desperation to turn on their fellow employees or their families or on themselves.

Art in Detroit

What predicts continued paternal involvement in their children's lives after a divorce is the quality of the relationship between the ex-spouses prior to the divorce.

This masculinization of irresponsibility is compounded by class and race. Poorer communities desperately need child support programs to enable and assist fathers in staying connected. Well-documented racial disparities in enforcement of child support laws create a perception that some fathers are significantly more irresponsible, creating (or enabling) the very dynamics they are supposed to remedy. Take just one example. In Dane County, Wisconsin, arrest rates for African Americans for nonpayment of child support are about 35 times those of white residents. Nearly one in two of those arrested for this reason were African Americans in a county whose African American population in 2000 was 4 percent of the total county population.²⁰

Found, not lost

The anti-feminists may shout loudest, and the new masculinists may be the most mediagenic of men's responses to increased gender equality, but they represent only a small fraction of American men. The largest, if least acknowledged, response to women's equality is the quiet acceptance of gender equality at both the public and private level. In the public sphere, the majority of American men support wage equality, comparable worth, women's candidacies for public office.

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On the domestic front, surveys consistently show "substantial and persistent" long-term trends increasing the endorsement of gender equality in families. With only modest attitudinal adjustment, most American men have adapted to the dual-career couple model that now characterizes most marriages. Some are even delighted to have the additional family income. Most American men subscribe

to a general “ethical imperative” and see women’s equality as right, just, and fair. They just don’t think it has all that much to do with them as men.²¹

But it does. As I will show below, when fatherhood is transformed from a political cause to a personal experience, from an ideological position or an existential state of being to a set of concrete practices, men’s lives are dramatically improved. As are their children’s.

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This acceptance isn’t the result of some grand ideological transformation in the meaning of manhood. Some part of it is simply financial. “These days, Ward Cleaver wouldn’t be able to afford a house in the suburbs or Beaver’s tuition—unless June went to work too,” writes Nicholas Kulish in *The New York Times*. Indeed, despite some evidence that the Great Recession may spur increases in reactive defensiveness among men, it may, in fact, propel the trend toward greater acceptance of equality. One recent survey found that a decline in men’s breadwinner status tends to promote egalitarian gender ideologies.²²

Plus, it is the inevitable result of countless micro-level decisions made by families every day: about their daughters’ and sons’ education, an increased intolerance for bullying or harassment, a sense of fairness about wage equality and reducing discrimination. It’s not that men woke up one morning and decided to scrap their traditional definition of masculinity. Rather, they gradually, and without fanfare or struggle, drifted into more egalitarian relationships because they love their wives, partners, and children.

Support for gender equality begins at home. Across race, class, and (nonevangelical) religious ideologies, support for the more conventional male-breadwinner/female homemaker ideology has fallen dramatically since the late 1970s. A new

report by the Families and Work Institute finds that while 74 percent of men (and 52 percent of women) subscribed to that conventional model in 1977, just over two-fifths of men (42 percent) and less than two-fifths of women (39 percent) subscribe to it today.²³

What's more, men's attitudes about women's ability to balance work and family also shifted in a decidedly positive direction. In 1977, less than half of men (49 percent) agreed with the statement, "A mother who works outside the home can have just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work." Thirty years later—a short time in terms of attitude shifts—two-thirds of men agree (as do 80 percent of women).

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This change is more pronounced the younger the respondent. Just over a third of "Millennial" employees who were 28 or younger in 2008 support that traditional family model today, while slightly more than half (53 percent) of mature workers (63 and older in 2008) support it—though 90 percent of mature workers subscribed to the conventional model in 1977. And while 70 percent of men in dual-career couples still subscribed to the more conventional model in 1977, only about 37 percent of them subscribe to that today.²⁴

While most American men's participation in family life, that is doing housework and child care, tends to be expressed by two two-word phrases—men "help out" and "pitch in"—men's share of housework and especially child care has also increased significantly in the past few decades. Men are both more likely to do more housework, and also more likely to hug their children and tell them that they love them, than in previous decades. It took several decades for the norm to be a dual-career couple; it will take several more decades before the norm is also a "dual-carer" couple.



HANDLING THE PLAY DATES. Fathers do more than barbecue these days. {JAMES ESTRIN, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*}

The average father today spends three hours a day on the weekend with his family, up significantly from estimates in earlier decades. While women still do the majority of routine housework, “husbands of working wives are spending more time in the family than in the past.” In 1924, 10 percent of working-class women said their husbands spent “no time” doing housework; today that percentage is less than 2 percent. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, men’s household labor increased from five to seven hours per week, while women’s share decreased by about five hours, from 27 hours to 22 hours per week.²⁵

Though we tend to think that sharing housework is the product of ideological commitments—progressive, liberal, well-educated middle-class families with more egalitarian attitudes—the data suggest a more complicated picture that has less to do with ideological concerns.

When couples were asked to keep accurate records of how much time they spent doing which household tasks, men still put in significantly less time than their wives. The most recent figures from the National Survey of Families and Households at the University of Wisconsin show that husbands were doing about 14 hours of housework per week (compared with 31 hours for wives). In more traditional couples in which she stays home and the husband is the sole earner, her hours jump to 38 and his decline slightly to 12.

Reasonable, since they’ve defined housework as “her” domain. But when both work full-time outside the home, the wife does 28 hours and the husband does 16.²⁶ This is four times the amount of housework that Japanese men do, but only two-thirds of the housework that Swedish men do.²⁷

Though we tend to think that sharing housework is the product of ideological commitments—progressive, liberal, well-educated middle-class families with more egalitarian attitudes—the data suggest a more complicated picture that has less to do with ideological concerns. In every single subcategory (meal preparation, dishes,

cleaning, shopping, washing, outdoor work, auto repair and maintenance, and bill paying), for example, black men do significantly more housework than white men. In more than one-fourth of all black families, men do more than 40 percent of the housework. Men's "share" of housework comes closer to an equal share.

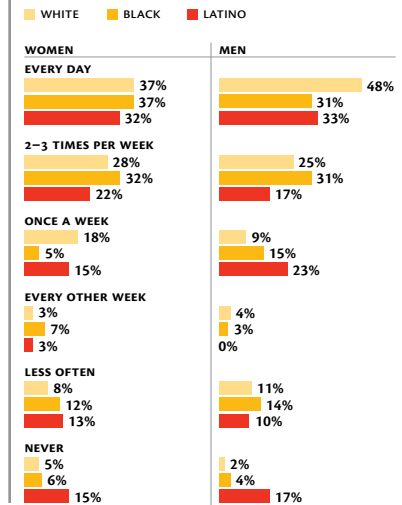
In white families, only 16 percent of the men do that much. And blue-collar fathers, regardless of race (municipal and service workers, policemen, firefighters, maintenance workers), are twice as likely (42 percent) as those in professional, managerial, or technical jobs (20 percent) to care for their children while their wives work. This difference comes less from ideological commitments and more from an "informal flex time," a split-shift arrangement with one's spouse, which is negotiated by about one-fourth of all workers in the United States, and one-third of all workers with children under age 5.²⁸

Such findings are echoed among Mexican-origin families. Fathers in these families did more housework when the family income was lower or when wives contributed a larger share of family income, an indication that among this population, too, economic reality can modify ideological assumptions.²⁹ Among immigrant groups, class position tends to be more important than ethnicity as well—though it might tend in a different direction. Taiwanese immigrant men, for example, in the professional class tend to hold more egalitarian attitudes and perform more housework and child care than do Taiwanese men in the working class.³⁰

As a result of these complex findings, researchers increasingly adopt an intersectional approach, exploring how race, class, ethnicity, and immigrant status interact to produce distinct patterns. It may be that class position—regardless of race, ethnicity, or

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Families today are very busy juggling multiple and conflicting schedules, duties, and responsibilities. How often do you and your spouse/partner need to coordinate your family's schedule?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.



LUNCH TIME. Family friendly working hours would help this father with his family chores and policeman's duties. {KEVIN HORAN, TIME LIFE PICTURES, GETTY IMAGES}

immigrant status—may be the best predictor of both ideological orientations and actual behaviors, though the two may be contradictory or mutually reinforcing.³¹

Housework aside, when it comes to being fathers, men are evidently willing to do more. A poll in *Newsweek* magazine found that 55 percent of fathers say that being a parent is more important to them than it was to their fathers, and 70 percent say they spend more time with their children than their fathers spent with them. What's more, they are actually *doing* it. According to the 2008 study by the Families and Work Institute, the amount of time fathers spend with their children under the age of 13 on workdays has increased from two hours a day in 1977 to three hours a day in 2008—an increase of 50 percent. Women's rate has

remained constant over that 30-year period, at 3.8 hours per workday. Millennial fathers spend 4.3 hours per workday (their wives spend five hours). Men are not merely walking their walk; they almost seem to be jogging it.³²

President Obama has also weighed in on the state of American fatherhood. In June 2008, during the presidential campaign, he took African American men to task for high rates of absenteeism in the lives of their children. And, as we've seen, after the dissolution of a relationship, many fathers dramatically reduce, or altogether lose, contact with their children. But while the couple is together—in both black families and white, native-born and immigrant, religious and secular—men are, today, more involved in child care than possibly any other generation in American history.

To be sure, there are some racial and ethnic differences. According to one 2005 U.S. Census Bureau study, 20 percent of white fathers are primary caregivers for their children when the mother is at work, compared to 11.3 percent of Asians, 12.7 percent of African Americans, and 15 percent of Hispanics. Note, though, that these differences are for primary caregiving, not caregiving in general, and that the rates are not so dramatically different. What's more, in all cases the trajectory is up.³³

Men's increased participation in child care has its challenges, of course. Men are reporting significantly higher levels of work-family conflict than they did 30 years ago.

Men's increased participation in child care has its challenges, of course. Men are reporting significantly higher levels of work-family conflict than they did 30 years ago (and their rates now surpass women's). Three of five fathers in dual-earner couples report significant work-family conflict, up from just over a third (35 percent) in 1977.³⁴

What's more, with men's child care participation increasing so much faster than their housework, a dangerous disequilibrium is developing in which dad is becoming the "fun parent." He takes the kids to the park and plays soccer with them; she stays home. "What a great time we had with dad!" the kids announce as they

burst through the kitchen door to a lunch that mom prepared while also folding the laundry and vacuuming the living room.

But when men do share housework as well as child care, the payoff is significant. Research by sociologists Scott Coltrane and Michele Adams looked at national survey data and found that when men increase their share of housework and child care, their children are happier, healthier, and do better in school.³⁵ They are less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, less likely to be put on prescription medication, and less likely to see a child psychologist for behavioral problems. They have lower rates of absenteeism and higher school achievement scores.

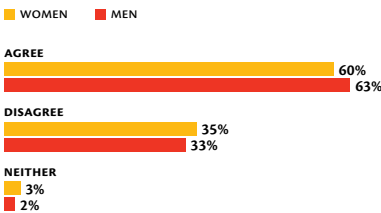
“When men perform domestic service for others, it teaches children cooperation and democratic family values,” said Coltrane. “It used to be that men assumed that their wives would do all the housework and parenting, but now that women are nearly equal participants in the labor force, men are assuming more of the tasks that it takes to run a home and raise children.”³⁶

Perhaps the most telling correlation is that when school-aged children do housework with their fathers, they get along better with their peers and have more friends. And they show more positive behaviors than if they did the same work with their mothers. “Because fewer men do housework than women,” said Adams, “when they share the work, it has more impact on children.” Fathers model “cooperative family partnerships.”

When men share housework and child care, it turns out, their wives are happier. This is intuitively

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Do you agree or disagree: Men today are less interested in playing the macho role than they were in years past?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.

obvious. Historically, working mothers reported higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression than full-time housewives. Yet they also reported lower levels of marital satisfaction than do their husbands, who are happier than the husbands of traditional housewives. This was because under such arrangements, women's workload increased at home, while the men benefited by having almost the same amount of work done for them at home and having their standard of living buttressed by an additional income.³⁷

But wives of egalitarian husbands, regardless of class or race and ethnicity, report the highest levels of marital satisfaction and lowest rates of depression, and are less likely to see therapists or take prescription medication. They are also more likely to stay fit, since they probably have more time on their hands.³⁸

The benefits for the men? Men who do more housework and child care are physically healthier. They smoke less, drink less, and take recreational drugs less often. They are more likely to stay in shape and more likely to go to doctors for routine screenings, but less likely to use emergency rooms or miss work due to illness.

They're also psychologically healthy. They are less often diagnosed with depression, and see therapists and take prescription medication less compared to men who do not share housework. They report higher levels of marital satisfaction. They also live longer, causing the normally staid British financial magazine *The Economist* to quip, "Change a nappy, by God, and put years on your life." "When males take full responsibility for child care," sociologist Barbara Risman points out, "they develop intimate and affectionate relationships with their children." Nurturing their children is good for men's health.³⁹

And they have more sex. Research by psychologist John Gottman at the University of Washington found higher rates of marital sex among couples where men did more housework and child care. This last finding was trumpeted by *Men's Health* magazine with the headline "Housework Makes Her Horny" (although I suspect that is not true when she does it). It is probably worthwhile pointing out that there is no one-to-one correspondence here; I would advise male readers of this essay against immediately rushing home to load the washing machine. Instead it points to wives' lower levels of stress in balancing work and family, coupled with a dramatic reduction in resentment that they alone are doing the second shift.

“Nothing without a woman or a girl”

There’s an old adage that the Chinese character for “crisis” is a combination of the characters for “danger” and “opportunity.” While some men see increased gender equality as a dangerous reversal of traditional gender arrangements, most men are going along for a rather apolitical ride, seeing neither danger nor opportunity. They’re doing more housework and child care, supporting their wives’ career aspirations, and sharing the decision-making about family life and career trajectories, not because of some ideological commitment to feminism, but because of a more commonplace commitment to their families and loved ones.

In a sense, they know the fix is already in. Women are in the labor force—and every other public arena—to stay. So the choice for men is how we will relate to this transformation. Will we be dragged kicking and screaming into the future? Flee to some male-only preserve, circle the masculine wagons, and regroup? Or instead, will the majority of us who are now somewhere between eager embrace and resigned acceptance see instead the opportunity for the “enthusiastic embrace” of gender equality?

Chances are we will—not only because it is inevitable (which it is) and not just because it’s right and just and fair (which it is). We will because we also see that men who embrace equality will live happier, healthier lives, lives animated by love and connection with our wives, our partners, our children, and our friends. And so will the children of these and most other men, who grow up with working mothers—and have sisters, friends, and girlfriends who expect to be equal at work and at home.

Men who have renegotiated a more gender-equitable path forward in their lives and their work have reaped significant benefits, yet many men continue to struggle with lost incomes, lost breadwinner status, and downward economic mobility that threatens their ability to see women’s progress for what it is. There is a role for government in helping all men understand there is a clear path forward where masculinity and gender equality are complementary, not adversarial:

- Most men are “apolitically accepting” of the new status quo, but there needs to be public space to develop a politically forward-thinking agenda where men and women together can champion the reforms presented throughout this report.

Men need to help create this public space, not rely on women to do so. Men need to speak out in the public sphere as fathers and partners, just as women have embraced their role as workers in their homes.

- As a result, both men and women both need the kinds of support that makes it possible to have dual-earner, dual-carer families, but these issues are most often misperceived as “women’s issues” in Washington and statehouses around the nation. Men need family-friendly policies, including on-site child care, health care reform, flexible working hours, and parental leave so that they can have the sorts of relationships they say they want to have.
- Policymakers need to support the choices of the majority of men who are pursuing gender equality within their homes. Men today are nearly as likely as women to take time off from work to care for ailing family members, but men remain less likely to take time off to bond with a new child. Policies that redefine what it means to be a good provider and a good citizen should encourage men and women to be both breadwinner and caretaker in their families.

Becoming a woman’s nation can be a vast improvement for everyone over remaining a man’s world. Gender equality is not a zero-sum game, but rather win-win.

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