The End of Men And the Rise of Women

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Extract

Throughout my reporting, a certain imaginary comic book duo kept presenting themselves to me: Plastic Woman and Cardboard Man. Plastic Woman has during the last century performed superhuman feats of flexibility. She has gone from barely working at all to working only until she got married to working while married and then working with children, even babies. If a space opens up for her to make more money than her husband, she grabs it. If she is no longer required by ladylike standards to restrain her temper, she starts a brawl at the bar. If she can get away with staying unmarried and living as she pleases deep into her thirties, she will do that too. And if the era calls for sexual adventurousness, she is game.

She is Napoleonic in her appetites. As she gobbles up new territories she hangs on to the old, creating a whole new set of existential dilemmas (too much work and too much domestic responsibility, too much power and too much vulnerability, too much niceness and not enough happiness). Studies that track women after they get their MBAs have even uncovered a superbreed of Plastic Women: They earn more than single women and just as much as the men. They are the women who have children but choose to take no time off work. They are the mutant creature our society now rewards the most—the one who can simultaneously handle the old male and female responsibilities without missing a beat.

Cardboard Man, meanwhile, hardly changes at all. A century can go by and his lifestyle and ambitions remain largely the same. There are many professions that have gone from all-male to female, and almost none that have gone the other way. For most of the century men derived their sense of manliness from their work, or their role as head of the family. A 'coalminer' or 'rigger' used to be a complete identity, connecting a man to a long lineage of men. Implicit in the title was his role as anchor of a domestic existence.

Some decades into the twentieth century, those obvious forms of social utility started to fade. Most men were no longer doing physically demanding labor of the traditional kind, and if they were, it was not a job for life. They were working in offices or not working at all, and instead taking out their frustration on the microwave at the 7-Eleven. And as fewer people got married, men were no longer acting as domestic providers, either. They lost
the old architecture of manliness, but they have not replaced it with any obvious new one. What's left now are the accessories, maybe the 'mancessories'— jeans and pickup trucks and designer switchblades, superheroes and thugs who rant and rave on TV and, at the end of the season, fade back into obscurity. This is what critic Susan Faludi in the late 1990s defined as the new 'ornamental masculinity,' and it has not yet evolved into anything more solid.

As a result men are stuck, or 'fixed in cultural aspic,' as critic Jessica Grose puts it. They could move more quickly into new roles now open to them— college graduate, nurse, teacher, full-time father— but for some reason, they hesitate. Personality tests over the decades show men tiptoeing into new territory, while women race into theirs. Men do a tiny bit more housework and child care than they did forty years ago, while women do vastly more paid work. The working mother is now the norm. The stay-at-home father is still a front-page anomaly.

The Bem test is the standard psychological tool used to rate people on how strongly they conform to a variety of measures considered stereotypically male or female: 'self-reliant,' 'yielding,' 'helpful,' 'ambitious,' 'tender,' 'dominant.' Since the test started being administered in the mid-1970s, women have been encroaching into what the test rates as male territory, stereotypically defining themselves as 'assertive,' 'independent,' 'willing to take a stand.' A typical Bem woman these days is 'compassionate' and 'self-sufficient,' 'individualistic,' and 'adaptable.' Men, however, have not met them halfway, and are hardly more likely to define themselves as 'tender' or 'gentle' than they were in 1974. In fact, by some measures men have been retreating into an ever-narrower space, backing away from what were traditionally feminine traits as women take over more masculine ones.

For a long time, evolutionary psychologists have attributed this rigidity to our being ruled by adaptive imperatives from a distant past: Men are faster and stronger and hardwired to fight for scarce resources, a trait that shows up in contemporary life as a drive to either murder or win on Wall Street. Women are more nurturing and compliant, suiting them perfectly to raise children and create harmony among neighbors. This kind of thinking frames our sense of the natural order.

But for women, it seems as if those fixed roles are more fungible than we ever imagined. A more female-dominated society does not necessarily translate into a soft feminine utopia. Women are becoming more aggressive and even violent in ways we once thought were exclusively reserved for men. This drive shows up in a new breed of female murderers, and also in a rising class of young female 'killers' on Wall Street. Whether the shift can be attributed to women now being socialized differently, or whether it's simply an artifact of our having misunderstood how women are 'hardwired' in the first place, is at
this point unanswerable, and makes no difference. Difficult as it is to conceive, the very rigid story we believed about ourselves is obviously no longer true. There is no 'natural' order, only the way things are.