

---

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

## The End of Male Supremacy



Pui Yan Fong for The Chronicle Review

By *Melvin Konner* | MARCH 30, 2015

**W**omen are not equal to men; they are superior in many ways, and in most ways that will count in the future. It is not just a matter of culture or upbringing. It is a matter of chromosomes, genes, hormones, and nerve circuits. It is not mainly because of how experience shapes women, but because of intrinsic differences in

the body and the brain.

Do these differences account for all the ways women and men differ? No. Are all men one way and all women another? Also no. But none of those considerations seriously impede my argument or deflect its key conclusion: Women are superior in most ways that matter now.

And no, I do not mean what was meant by patronizing men who said this in the past — that women are lofty, tender, spiritual creatures. I mean something like the opposite of that. I mean that women are fundamentally pragmatic as well as caring, cooperative as well as competitive, skilled in getting their own egos out of the way, deft in managing people without putting them on the defensive, builders not destroyers. Above all, I mean that women can carry on the business of a complex world in ways that are more focused, efficient, deliberate, and constructive than men's because women are not frequently distracted by impulses and moods that, sometimes indirectly, lead to sex and violence. Women are more reluctant participants in both. And if they are drawn into wars, these will be wars of necessity, not of choice, founded on rational considerations, not on a clash of egos escalating out of control.

This is not a new idea. Elizabeth Cady Stanton gave an address to the National Woman Suffrage Convention in Washington, D.C., on January 19, 1869. She said, "The same arguments made in this country for extending suffrage ... to white men, native born citizens, without property and education, and to foreigners ... and the same used by the great Republican party to enfranchise a million black men in the South, all these arguments we have to-day to offer for woman, and one, in addition, stronger than all besides, the difference in man and woman. Because man and woman are the complement of one another, we need woman's thought in national affairs to make a safe and stable government."

She also said, "When the highest offices in the gift of the people are bought and sold in Wall Street, it is a mere chance who will be our rulers. Whither is a nation tending when brains count for less than bullion, and clowns make laws for queens?" Almost 150 years later, the highest offices are still bought and sold on Wall Street, and clowns make laws for queens. But the latter, at least, is coming to an end.

Yet notice: What additional argument for women's equality is "stronger than all besides"? "The difference in man and woman." Men and women complement each other. After a century and a half of research, Stanton's argument from difference is stronger than ever, grounded in evolution, brain science, child psychology, and anthropology. And we can take it a step further.

In addition to women's superiority in judgment, their trustworthiness, reliability, fairness, working and playing well with others, relative freedom from distracting sexual impulses, and lower levels of prejudice, bigotry, and violence, they live longer, have lower mortality at all ages, are more resistant to most categories of disease, and are much less likely to suffer brain disorders that lead to disruptive and even destructive behavior. And, of course, they can produce new life from their own bodies, to which men add only the tiniest biological contribution — and one that soon could be done without.

I am not recommending that, you understand; I am merely saying it is feasible, whereas the reverse situation is a biological impossibility, except with a borrowed womb. As a man, I would like my kind to stick around and stay useful. I also have it on pretty good authority that most women would not like to get rid of men. But the vast majority of women, and many men as well, want to see a world in which opportunities, responsibilities, and rewards are shared more equally between the two sexes. This is not because they are so similar — although they are in many ways — but because they are different.

Contrary to all received wisdom, women are more logical and less emotional than men. Women do cry more easily, and that, too, is partly biological. But life on this planet isn't threatened by women's tears; nor does that brimming salty fluid cause poverty, drain public coffers, ruin reputations, impose forced intimacies, slay children, torture helpless people, or reduce cities to rubble. These disasters are literally man-made. They result from men's emotions, which are a constant distraction to them.

I've been told that I'm too hard on men — that I should recognize that most men are not guilty of violence, rape, promiscuity, or warmongering. Of course they're not. But the minority that is guilty of those things is dangerously large — many times larger than it is in women — and that minority has put a strong stamp on human history. In fact, you might say it is largely responsible for history. This is part of what Simone de Beauvoir meant when she said, in *The Second Sex*, "The problem of woman has always been a problem of men."

But — another objection goes — men have accomplished great things! Yes, although given that men have blocked women's paths to greatness in all fields for thousands of years, it is hardly a fair comparison. So let us concede: Most men are not destructive, and not all women are cooperative and nurturing; women have their own means of creating conflict

and oppressing others. But in science we ask whether generalizations are possible, and in the domain of sex differences in brain and behavior, they are not only possible but also fully justified by the evidence.

Extreme forms of male domination are an anomaly in our history — a long-lasting one but nevertheless temporary. In terms of the relationship between the sexes, we are recovering equality, not inventing it.

**T**here is a birth defect that is surprisingly common, affecting a key pair of chromosomes. In the normal condition the two look the same, but in this disorder one is shrunken beyond recognition. The result is shortened life span, higher mortality at all ages, an inability to reproduce, premature hair loss, and brain defects variously resulting in attention deficit, hyperactivity, conduct disorder, hypersexuality, and an enormous excess of both outward and self-directed aggression. The main mechanism is androgen poisoning. I call it the X-chromosome deficiency syndrome, and a stunning 49 percent of the human species is affected.

It is also called maleness.

To call being male a syndrome is not an arbitrary judgment. It is based on evolution, physiology, development, and susceptibility to disease. Once, all of our ancestors could reproduce from their own bodies; we were all basically female. When biologists ask why sex evolved, they are not asking rhetorically — the fact that sex feels good was a nice addition. What they are asking is: *Why did those self-sufficient females invent males?* It had to be a very big reason, since they were bringing in a whole new cast of characters who took up space and ate their fill, but could not themselves realize the goal of evolution: creating new life.

The best answer seems to be: to escape being wiped out by germs. When you make new life on your own, you basically clone yourself, and ultimately lots of your offspring and relatives have the same genes. The germ that gets one of you gets you all. Create males, and in due course there is much more variation. Meanwhile, you export the fiercest part of the competition. You do the reproducing, he doesn't (except for his teensy donation), so he can duke it out with the other males and they can evolve faster. But it turns out you have created a sort of Frankenstein monster, after a certain point hard to control. Women might be forgiven for looking back with a jaded eye on whichever ancestor gave birth to the first male.

Men being what they are, women have always had to struggle for equality, even in the small hunter-gatherer bands from which we evolved. Yet it got much worse. With the rise of what we like to call civilization, men's superior muscle fostered a vast military, economic, and political conspiracy, enabling them to exclude women from leading roles. Appealing myths about Amazons are just that: myths. Even in matrilineal societies, men had most of the

**To call being male a syndrome is not an arbitrary judgment. It is based on evolution, physiology, development, and susceptibility to disease.**

power. The result was 10 or 12 millennia in which we squandered half of the best talent in the human race. Brawn mattered for those centuries, but in spite of their greater strength, men had to make laws to suppress women because on a truly level playing field, women were destined to compete successfully and very often win.

Victors write history, and the victors in the battle between the sexes have defined women downward and invented an "essential" inferiority of women as a part of femininity itself. That is not biology; it is a man-made myth.

But millennial male dominance is about to end. Glass ceilings are splintering into countless shards of light, and women are climbing male power pyramids in every domain of life. Even in the most sexist societies, women and girls form a fundamentally subversive group that will undermine age-old male conceit. Even in the poorest lands, the increasing availability of women's suffrage, health services, microloans, and savings programs is giving them control over their destinies. The best way to spend an aid dollar is to educate women and girls.

Male domination has outlived any purpose it may once have had. Perhaps it played some role in our success as a species so far, but now it is an obstacle. Empowering women is the next step in human evolution.

**M**en and women are similar in many ways, and there is hardly a trait of emotion or mind where we do not greatly overlap. But we must understand how the sexes differ, in two ways especially: violence and what I call "driven sexuality" — the kind that says, *I have to have it now*, and too often leads to behavior that demeans or oppresses women or distracts and derails male politicians.

Men have always justified their violence by reference to that of their enemies because women really did need protection — from the rapist down the block, from the warriors over the hill. As for male sexuality, it has been, as Camille Paglia pointed out in *Sexual Personae* (1990), one of the great sources of male creativity. But the way it normally drives men's actions, the way it becomes detached from relationships and affection, and the way it is often intertwined with violence make it a force that women should acknowledge and, up to a point, fear. Yet they should not allow that force to control them; on the contrary, *they* must control *it*, and that starts with wary understanding.

Hanna Rosin's book *The End of Men* (2012) made the case that among younger people the replacement of men by women is well under way. Anthropologists take the long view. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton made her speech in 1869 about differences between the sexes, a devastating war had just freed the slaves, but the nonviolent struggle for women's rights was only beginning. Half a century later women would vote, control property, use birth control, and begin to enter the professions.

Half a century after that, women realized how far they had to go and created second-wave feminism. At stake were equal pay for equal work; equal access to education, the media, the military,

**Even in the most sexist societies, women and girls form a fundamentally subversive group that will**

and the professions; new and full reproductive rights; sexual freedom; the end of the double standard of sexual morality; a real voice in the public square; the option to escape from an abusive or otherwise bad marriage; an end to rape and other violence; and a final expiration of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* — children, kitchen, church, as the Nazis summed up women's proper purview.

**undermine  
age-old male  
conceit.**

Now we are closing in on yet half a century more. Although I don't want to see the end of men, progress for women is now steady and irreversible. I acknowledge the limitations. As of 2015, women were CEOs of only 4.6 percent of Fortune 500 companies and 5.2 percent of Fortune 1000 firms. They held only 84, or 19 percent, of the 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and only 20 of the 100 Senate seats. Women headed only about 20 of some 190 nations. Only about 25 percent of American colleges and universities had women presidents. This looks bad. But keep in mind that almost every one of these numbers has increased in just a few years, and most were zero or near zero when second-wave feminism was born.

So how should we think about the percentages? Is the Senate glass 80 percent empty or 20 percent full? How about the CEO glass — 95 percent empty or 5 percent full?

When I went to college in the 1960s, professional schools had a handful of women in a class of a hundred. Today they are approaching half at medical and law schools. More than 40 percent of students entering M.B.A. programs — the pool of future CEOs — are women. Yes, there are glass ceilings, but they are slowly being broken. Women make up 33 percent of federal district-court judges, almost 35 percent of federal appeals-court judges, and one-third of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Girls and women in the United States do better in school than boys and men. The original gender gap has been almost completely reversed. The majority of young people now graduating from high school, entering college, and finishing college are female, and this inevitably means more women leaders.

In the 21st century, and especially since 2008, men's job losses and overall unemployment have been much higher than those of women. According to the National Women's Law Center, from the beginning of the recovery to July 2013, American women regained almost 95 percent of their lost jobs while men regained only 65 percent. In the same time period, women's unemployment declined from 7.6 to 6.5 percent and men's from 9.9 to 7.0 percent.

And more women are going into business for themselves. As *Forbes* magazine put it in 2012, "Entrepreneurship is the new women's movement." Similar trends are evident in the nonprofit sector. Women lead around 19 percent of America's four hundred largest charities, nearly four times the percentage of women running Fortune 500 companies.

Women's empowerment also predicts democracy. A 2013 study in the journal *World Development* began:

"In the latter part of the 20th century many countries moved away from autocratic rule toward more democratic regimes. During this period women's economic and social rights also improved, with greater access to education and employment, and a worldwide fall in fertility rates. The general presumption has been that democracy leads to improvements in these aspects of gender equality. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the possibility that a causal relationship may operate in the opposite direction."

Insufficient no longer; the authors analyzed data for 97 countries followed from 1980 to 2005, so they could look at all the relevant dimensions and how they changed over time. First, the number of democracies more than doubled from 37 to 80 in that quarter century. The countries that transitioned to democracy had higher average levels of women's educational attainment, more women in the labor force, and lower fertility — first. "Rather than being a natural consequence of economic development, we have shown empirically that female empowerment has a causal effect on democratic development, independent of the commonly used measures of modernization." This is a brand-new discovery, and it solves the problem of the chicken and the egg. Women's empowerment comes first, and democracy follows.

So if you're wondering what the future holds, these and other indicators give us a crystal ball: As women gain in influence, all else being equal, the world will become more democratic, more socially compassionate, more equal, less discriminatory, less sexually casual, and less pornographic.

Of course, there is a long way to go, and women should be impatient. If not for their impatience, I would be much less optimistic. But change has been happening steadily for 150 years in the Western world. The future is wide open.

**A**ccording to a bad old adage, "A woman is the child of her father, her husband, and her son." This sequence was long true in legal terms, and was highlighted in 1869 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton as "invading ... our homes, desecrating our family altars, dividing those whom God has joined together, exalting the son above the mother who bore him, and subjugating, everywhere, moral power to brute force."

No more. In 50 years, equality may not be numerically, exactly here in every realm, but it will be evident to everyone that history is on women's side. Even in the most oppressive societies, women will be a deeply subversive force.

The anthropologist Helen Fisher, in her book *The First Sex* (1999), was similarly optimistic: "Like a glacier, contemporary women are slowly carving a new economic and social landscape, building a new world." I agree, except that only the relentlessness will be glacial; the pace will not. It will be like the rise in life expectancy, the decline of family size, the spread of democracy — a matter of decades or, at most, generations. Having known five generations in my own limited life, I don't see this as a long time. In the light of evolution, archaeology, and history, it's no time at all.

The future history of women is an open book; the empty pages beckon with impatience and expectation, and women will fill those pages with splendid untold stories.

*Melvin Konner is a professor of anthropology and behavioral biology at Emory University.*

*This essay is adapted from his new book, Women After All: Sex, Evolution, and the End of Male Supremacy (Norton).*

*This article is part of:*

Top Reads of 2015

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037

Copyright © 2016 The Chronicle of Higher Education