

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH MEN?

They're floundering at school and in the workplace. Some conservatives blame a crisis of masculinity, but the problems—and their solutions—are far more complex.

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Gender equality, Richard V. Reeves contends, now calls for a focus on male deficits. Illustration by Golden Cosmos

First, there was Adam, whose creation takes center stage on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Then, fashioned out of Adam's spare rib, there was Eve, relegated to a smaller panel. In Michelangelo's rendition, as in the Bible's, the first man sleeps through the miraculous creation of his soul mate, the first woman and the eventual mother of humanity. Many of our foundational myths are, in this way, stories about men, related by men to other men. The notion of female equality is, historically, an innovation. "Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality," Simone de Beauvoir wrote in "The Second Sex," published in 1949. "And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change." Nearly three-quarters of a century later, that change has continued. By a variety of metrics, men are falling behind parity. Is the second sex becoming the better half?

Many social scientists agree that contemporary American men are mired in malaise, even as they disagree about the causes. In academic performance, boys are well behind girls in elementary school, high school, and college, where the sex ratio is approaching two female undergraduates for every one male. (It was an even split at the start of the nineteen-eighties.) Rage among self-designated "incels" and other elements of the online "manosphere" appears to be steering some impressionable teens toward misogyny. Men are increasingly dropping out of work during their prime working years, overdosing, drinking themselves to death, and generally dying earlier, including by suicide. And men are powering the new brand of reactionary Republican politics, premised on a return to better times, when America was great—and, unsubtly, when men could really be men. The question is what to make of the paroxysm. For the revanchist right, the plight of American men is existential. It is an affront to biological (and perhaps Biblical) determinism, a threat to an entire social order. Yet, for all the strides that women have made since gaining the right to vote, the highest echelons of power remain lopsidedly male. The detoxification of masculinity, progressives say, is a messy and necessary process; sore losers of undeserved privilege don't merit much sympathy.

Richard V. Reeves, a British American scholar of inequality and social mobility, and a

self-described “conscientious objector in the culture wars,” would like to skip past the moralizing and analyze men in the state that he finds them: beset by bewildering changes that they cannot adapt to. His latest book, “Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It” (Brookings), argues that the rapid liberation of women and the labor-market shift toward brains and away from brawn have left men bereft of what the sociologist David Morgan calls “ontological security.” They now confront the prospect of “cultural redundancy,” Reeves writes. He sees telltale signs in the way that boys are floundering at school and men are leaving work and failing to perform their paternal obligations. All this, he says, has landed hardest on Black men, whose life prospects have been decimated by decades of mass incarceration, and on men without college degrees, whose wages have fallen in real terms, whose life expectancies have dropped markedly, and whose families are fracturing at astonishing rates. Things have become so bad, so quickly, that emergency social repairs are needed. “It is like the needles on a magnetic compass reversing their polarity,” Reeves writes. “Suddenly, working for gender equality means focusing on boys rather than girls.”

That either-or can be disputed; the transformed social landscape that men face cannot. When Beauvoir was writing her manifesto on the plight of women, she noted that “the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women,” and that “a man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male.” Nowadays, there are many such books. Self-doubt has broken through the supposed imperviousness of masculine self-belief. Reeves’s book is only the latest; it is also one of the most cogent. That’s not just a consequence of his compelling procession of statistical findings. It’s also due to the originality of his crisply expressed thesis: that men’s struggles are not reducible to a masculinity that is too toxic or too enfeebled but, rather, reflect the workings of the same structural forces that apply to every other group.

Reeves excels in relaying uncomfortable truths to his fellow-liberals—a talent that he displayed in his previous book, “Dream Hoarders,” about how well-meaning, college-educated parents are hindering social mobility. Still, he says, when he brought up the idea for “Of Boys and Men,” many people tried to discourage him from writing it. Progressives are generally happier to discuss current social disparities that go in the expected direction (such as the Black-white gap in life expectancy) than those which don’t (the fact, say, that life expectancy among Hispanics is slightly higher than among

non-Hispanic whites). Besides, if our model of gender politics is zero-sum, the educational and economic decline of men may even be welcome. Women had to endure centuries of subjugation and discrimination; should we really be alarmed that they are just now managing to overshoot gender parity in a few domains?

“Of Boys and Men” argues for a speedy response because the decline in the fortunes of present-day men—not only in comparison with women but in absolute terms—augurs so poorly for men several decades on. “As far as I can tell, nobody predicted that women would overtake men so rapidly, so comprehensively, or so consistently around the world,” Reeves writes. He notes that schoolgirls outperform schoolboys both in advanced countries that still struggle with considerable sexism, such as South Korea, and in notably egalitarian countries like Sweden (where researchers say they are confronting a *pojkkrisen*, or “boy crisis”). In 2009, American high-school students in the top ten per cent of their freshman class were twice as likely to be female. Boys, meanwhile, are at least twice as likely to be diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and twice as likely to be suspended; their dropout rates, too, are considerably higher than those of their female counterparts. Young men are also four times as likely to die from suicide.

This story pushes to the side the male-favoring disparities in the world of work. The gender pay gap is usually described by noting that a woman earns eighty-four cents for every dollar earned by a man (though this is up from sixty-four cents in 1980). Barely one-tenth of the C.E.O.s in the Fortune 500 are women (and that is itself a twenty-six-fold increase since 2000, when only two women were in the club). The #MeToo movement began just five years ago; the sexual harassment that women face has hardly been extinguished. Even in the workplace, however, gender convergence may be arriving sooner than anticipated. An axiom of policymaking is that disparate educational achievement today will manifest in disparate earnings later. Reeves points out that women earn roughly three-fifths of all bachelor’s and master’s degrees awarded. They are the majority of current medical and law students. And they’ve made extraordinary gains in subjects where they had once been highly underrepresented; they now constitute a third of current graduates in STEM fields and more than forty per cent of students in business schools.

Much of the gender gap in pay, as Claudia Goldin, a labor economist at Harvard, notes, is driven not by direct discrimination—our conventional understanding of a

sexist boss paying a female employee less than an identically situated male one—but by differences in occupational choice. A more elusive target has been indirect forms of discrimination, including those sustained by social conditioning (which helps explain the gender skew of certain occupations) and domestic arrangements that favor men. Within occupations, there's often no wage gap until women have children and reduce their work hours. "For most women, having a child is the economic equivalent of being hit by a meteorite," Reeves observes. "For most men, it barely makes a dent." Goldin's analysis is blunt: "The gender gap in hourly compensation would vanish if long, inflexible work days and weeks weren't profitable to employers." Yet there may be reason for optimism. The years-long pandemic and the subsequent labor shortage have forced employers to be more flexible in scheduling—particularly within the most highly remunerated white-collar professions. If that situation endures, the gender pay gap could continue its decline, and boardrooms may become more balanced by attrition.

Good things can also come about for bad reasons, though. Even if, as the French economist Thomas Piketty has suggested, global wars have helped reduce inequality between the rich and the poor, egalitarians should hesitate to become warmongers. And so it's chastening to realize that the substantial decline in the gender earnings gap is partly the result of stagnating wages for working men (which have not grown appreciably in the past half century, adjusting for inflation), and partly of the steady creep in the number of men who drop out of the labor force entirely.

We have some idea of why blue-collar wages have stagnated: a macroeconomic shift that greatly raised the value of a college degree, owing in part to the decimation of manual labor by automation and globalization. White men experienced a specific blow that Black men had felt earlier and even more acutely. In a classic study, "The Truly Disadvantaged," the sociologist William Julius Wilson argued that early waves of deindustrialization after the Second World War devastated the lives of working-class African Americans, who were buffeted both by economic forces, in the form of greater rates of joblessness, and by social ones, including worsened prospects for marriage. Later came the effects of the so-called China shock—the contraction of American manufacturing, a male-skewing sector, as a result of increased trade. David Autor, an economist at M.I.T., estimates that normalizing trade relations with China in 2001 cost as many as two million American jobs, often in places that had not recovered even a decade later. A shelf of popular books about the white working class—Arlie

Hochschild's "Strangers in Their Own Land," Amy Goldstein's "Janesville," even the newly minted senator J. D. Vance's "Hillbilly Elegy"—have sought to reckon with the social consequences of these economic transformations. None of them conveys much optimism.

What should we make of the growing tendency of men to drop out of the workforce? In the past half century, fewer and fewer men have returned to work after each recession—like a ball that can never match its previous height as it rebounds. In 1960, ninety-seven per cent of men of “prime age,” between twenty-five and fifty-four, were working. Today, close to one in nine prime-age men is neither working nor seeking work. In the recently reissued "Men Without Work: Post-Pandemic Edition" (Templeton), the conservative demographer and economist Nicholas Eberstadt points out that men are now employed at roughly the same rate as in 1940, back when America was still recovering from the Great Depression. Citing time-use surveys—the detailed diaries that the Bureau of Labor Statistics compiles on how Americans spend their days—Eberstadt reports that most of these hours of free time are spent watching screens rather than doing household labor or caring for family members. Instead of socializing more, men without work are even less involved in their communities than those with jobs. The available data suggest that their lot is not a happy one.

It would help if we had a firm grasp on why men are withdrawing from work. Many economists have theories. Eberstadt believes that “something like infantilization besets some un-working men.” He notes the availability of disability-insurance programs (roughly a third of nonworking men reported some kind of disability in 2016) and the over-all expansion of the social safety net after the nineteen-sixties. In 2017, the late Alan Krueger, who chaired President Obama’s Council of Economic Advisers, calculated that nearly half of all nonworking men were taking pain medication on a daily basis, and argued that the increased prescribing of opioids could explain a lot of the decline in the male labor force. Erik Hurst, an economist at the University of Chicago, thinks that the rapid improvement in video-game quality could account for much of the especially deep drop in work among younger men. Anyone who has recently played (or momentarily lost a loved one to) Elden Ring or God of War Ragnarök can grasp the immersive spell that video games cast. But, in the end, most economists admit that they cannot settle on an exact etiology for the problem of nonworking men. The former Treasury Secretary and Harvard president Larry

Summers, who is not known for his intellectual humility, recently surmised that “the answers here lie more in the realm of sociology than they do in economics.” Reeves, too, thinks that we can’t explain the economic decline of men without looking at non-economic factors: “It is not that men have fewer opportunities. It is that they are not taking them.”

An intersectional approach may prove useful here. Consider a recent landmark study of income-tax returns, in which it was definitively established that Black Americans go on to earn substantially less than whites even if their parents were similarly wealthy. Remarkably, the gap is due entirely to the differing prospects for Black men relative to white men. In fact, Black women earn slightly *more* than white women who came from economically matched households. Sex-specific variables—like the extraordinarily high rate of incarceration among Black men—are evidently holding back progress. Although boys are as likely as girls to grow up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty or in fractured families (sex at birth being almost a pure coin toss), an emerging body of evidence suggests that boys may be less resilient to such adversity. In a paper titled “The Trouble with Boys,” the economists Marianne Bertrand and Jessica Pan found that “boys raised outside of a traditional family (with two biological parents present) fare especially poorly,” with substantially worse behavior in school and considerably lower skills in “noncognitive” areas, such as emotional sensitivity and persistence, that increasingly matter in the workplace. The gender gap in school suspensions, already large, more than doubles among children with single mothers.

Reeves offers a wide menu of policies designed to foster a “prosocial masculinity for a postfeminist world.” He would encourage more men to become nurses and teachers, expand paid leave, and create a thousand more vocational high schools. His signature idea, though, is to “redshirt” boys and give them all, by default, an extra year of kindergarten. The aim is to compensate for their slower rates of adolescent brain development, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, which controls decision-making. Reeves, who places great stock in this biological difference, also places great stock in his proposed remedy: “A raft of studies of redshirted boys have shown dramatic reductions in hyperactivity and inattention through the elementary school years, higher levels of life satisfaction, lower chances of being held back a grade later, and higher test scores.”

If that sounds too good to be true, it may well be. One of the studies he cites concludes that “there is little evidence that being older than one’s classmates has any long-term, positive effect on adult outcomes such as IQ, earnings, or educational attainment”; on the contrary, it finds “substantial evidence” that the practice is linked to higher high-school-dropout rates and lower over-all earnings. Reeves insists that he’d be vindicated if the protocol were applied more widely, but his case isn’t very strong. We might hesitate before prescribing half the population an unusually strong and uncertain medicine. Still, he is at least proposing serious solutions. Many of his fellow-liberals remain undecided about whether below-par outcomes for males even merit attention, let alone efforts to remedy them.

The political right has eagerly filled the void. At the 2021 National Conservatism Conference, the Republican senator Josh Hawley gave a keynote speech on the crisis of masculinity, in which he blamed “an effort the left has been at for years now,” guided by the premise that “the deconstruction of America begins with and depends on the deconstruction of American men.” Hawley, who is planning to expound upon his thoughts in a forthcoming book titled “Manhood,” argued that the solution must begin with “repudiating the lie that America is systemically oppressive and men are systematically responsible,” and with rebuilding “those manufacturing and production sectors that so much of the chattering class has written off as relics of the past.”

Meanwhile, the mass-market appeal of the contentious cultural commentator Jordan Peterson suggests an appetite for quasi-spiritual self-help (“Stand up straight with your shoulders back”) in a secular age—Goop for young men. The vintage machismo that Donald Trump so prizes may explain why the gender gap in the popular opinion of him was so large. And the swing among Hispanic voters toward Republicans is being driven, in no small part, by Hispanic men. How men are faring in school and at work may not arouse everyone’s concern, but how men choose to pursue politics inevitably affects us all.

Gender theorists have described a perennial struggle among multiple masculinities. In this scenario, nobody who values the prospect of eliminating gender hierarchies can afford to be a bystander. Masculinity is fragile; it’s also malleable. The shapes it will assume in the future have consequences. ♦