

The trouble with men

IT MAY be a man's world now, but "Tomorrow belongs to women" (to borrow the title of a book by Jack Lang, a French politician and sex symbol). No wonder.

Apart from being more violent, more prone to disease, more likely to succumb to drugs, bad diet or suicide—more socially undesirable from almost every point of view, in fact—men, it seems, are also slightly more stupid than women. At any rate, boys are doing less well than girls at school. And since, with each passing year, more brainy word-processing consultants and nursery-school teachers get new jobs while more brawny coal miners and machine-tool operators lose theirs, it seems inevitable that women with their graduate certificates and mothering instincts will soon be doing ever more of the world's work, while men lag further behind. A woman's work is never done; a man is drunk from sun to sun.

Well, does that matter? Biologists might answer: not much. To them, men are useful largely for one thing: supplying genetic products to mothers. Providing half a baby's genes stirs up the gene pool and outwits the bacteria and viruses that prey on the species. Also from a biologist's point of view, a lot of aggressive male behaviour is so much genetic advertising. Having men lock antlers, brag about football and indulge in dangerous virility rituals enables women, in some mysterious way, to pick the best genes to hand on.

But nature's methods seem extremely crude. Why not be a tad more scientific? The next generation does not need the current crop of men to be carrying around their sperm all the time. A clean, well-run sperm bank, regularly topped up, would be just as good—and would dispense with men's unfortunate social side-effects. Sperm banks could provide a wide range of gene services, offering, say, high intelligence, predilection to be a surgeon, blue eyes, long legs and so forth. In America, they already provide a splendid array of choices (and offer insurance in case sperm counts fall even further).

Meanwhile, in terms of cultural evolution, men may well have done their job: they have pretty much set up modern civilisations and technologies; they may not be needed to keep them going. Knowledge-based societies, with their stress on brain not brawn, may be safer in women's hands.

Testosterone and its antidotes

Back to real life. Men have not been humanely phased out. They still have more jobs than women and, on average, earn higher salaries. In the middle and upper income brackets, men are adjusting—albeit slowly—to women's growing economic power. But down at the bottom of the ladder, where men are men and women change the nappies (but also have the jobs), there are troubles of an entirely different order.



Here whole communities are caught in a deadly vice. As the article on pages 23-26 argues, in areas which used to depend on heavy industry, changes in the nature of work have laid waste the traditional sources of unskilled male employment. Men who used to work in the collieries or shipyards have proved unable (or, which is almost the same thing, unwilling) to do the "women's work" springing up in the industrial ruins. As their jobs have declined, so have their prospects of marriage, for who wants to link their lot with a jobless deadbeat? And as work and marriage have declined together, so everyone has suffered, for these two, since time immemorial, have

been the twin responsibilities that have persuaded men to stay with women and children, obey the law and behave as social animals. For women, work and family are often competing spheres; for men, they are linked. When the link is broken, some men, in some places, become loose molecules: uneducated, unskilled, unmarried and unemployed.

Perhaps this will change. Perhaps men will begin to compete more vigorously for "women's work". Perhaps they will find jobs, and, having got them, marry and look after children again. But the evidence so far is against it. At best, men will change their ways reluctantly and more slowly than the quickening pace of economic change. Meanwhile, the blue-collar problem will grow.

Men learn social behaviour through work and marriage, rather than grasp it by instinct. Nothing can be done to change that. Nothing should be done to turn the clock back—by, for example, discriminating against women at work or keeping open economically pointless factories (which would amount to the same thing, since that would penalise the new jobs women do). As the survey after page 56 argues, the engines of economic change—information technology and globalisation—are, contrary to rumour, benefiting the vast majority of humanity: not just women in the West but millions of men and women everywhere.

So such remedies as are possible must concentrate on the places where the social problems are worst: the inner cities. One reason that boys are falling behind girls at urban primary and secondary schools is that too few male teachers are around for boys to look up to and model their behaviour upon. Attracting more male teachers would help close the gap in educational attainment and improve boys' job prospects. More can and should be done to improve the skills of young men: it is especially worth concentrating on their schooling and vocational education, even though men often pooh-pooh such things. And a lot can be done to alleviate the social evils of areas where employment and marriage rates are lowest. While the source of the trouble may be unemployment,

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much of the damage that flows from this is connected to the easy availability of guns and drugs. Here, more efficient restrictions are needed, which means, for drugs, decriminalisation and control.

Such a list may seem a piecemeal and partial response to

“the trouble with men”. Granted, it is only a start. But with all great social changes, there comes a stage, before comprehensive policies can be agreed upon, when what is needed is to recognise that a problem exists and accept that it cannot be left to fester. With men in the ghettos, that stage has arrived.
