



The Death of Macho

Manly men have been running the world forever. But the Great Recession is changing all that, and it will alter the course of history.

BY REIHAN SALAM | JUNE 22, 2009



The era of male dominance is coming to an end.

Seriously.

For years, the world has been witnessing a quiet but monumental shift of power from men to women. Today, the Great Recession has turned what was an evolutionary shift into a revolutionary one. The consequence will be not only a mortal blow to the macho men's club called finance capitalism that got the world into the current economic catastrophe; it will be a collective crisis for millions and millions of working men around the globe.

The death throes of macho are easy to find if you know where to look. Consider, to start, the almost unbelievably disproportionate impact that the current crisis is having on men—so much so that the recession is now known to some economists and the more plugged-in corners of the blogosphere as the “he-cession.” More than 80 percent of job losses in the United States since November have fallen on men, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. And the numbers are broadly similar in Europe, adding up to about 7 million more out-of-work men than before the recession just in the United States and Europe as economic sectors traditionally dominated by men (construction and heavy manufacturing) decline further and faster than those traditionally dominated by women (public-sector employment, healthcare, and education). All told, by the end of 2009, the global recession is expected to put as many as 28 million men out of work worldwide.

Things will only get worse for men as the recession adds to the pain globalization was already causing. Between 28 and 42 million more jobs in the United States are at risk for outsourcing, Princeton economist Alan Blinder estimates. Worse still, men are falling even further behind in acquiring the educational credentials necessary for success in the knowledge-based economies that will rule the post-recession world. Soon, there will be three female college graduates for every two males in the United States, and a similarly uneven outlook in the rest of the developed world.

Of course, macho is a state of mind, not just a question of employment status. And as men get hit harder in the he-cession, they're even less well-equipped to deal with the profound and long-term psychic costs of job loss. According to the *American Journal of Public Health*, “the financial strain of unemployment” has significantly more consequences on the mental health of men than on that of women. In other words, be prepared for a lot of unhappy guys out there—with all the negative consequences that implies.

As the crisis unfolds, it will increasingly play out in the realm of power politics. Consider the electoral responses to this global catastrophe that are starting to take shape. When Iceland's economy imploded, the country's voters did what no country has done before: Not only did they throw out the all-male elite who oversaw the making of the crisis, they named the world's first openly lesbian leader as their prime minister. It was, said Halla Tomasdottir, the female head of one of Iceland's few remaining solvent banks, a perfectly reasonable response to the “penis competition” of male-dominated investment banking. “Ninety-nine percent went to the same school, they drive the same cars, they wear the same suits and they have the same attitudes. They got us into this situation—and they had a lot of fun doing it,” Tomasdottir complained to *Der Spiegel*. Soon after, tiny, debt-ridden Lithuania took a similar course, electing its first woman president: an experienced economist with a black belt in karate named Dalia Grybauskaitė. On the day she won, Vilnius's leading newspaper bannered this headline: “Lithuania has decided: The country is to be saved by a woman.”

Although not all countries will respond by throwing the male bums out, the backlash is real—and it is global. The great shift of power from males to females is likely to be dramatically accelerated by the economic crisis, as more people realize that the aggressive, risk-seeking behavior that has enabled men to entrench

their power—the cult of macho—has now proven destructive and unsustainable in a globalized world.

Indeed, it's now fair to say that the most enduring legacy of the Great Recession will not be the death of Wall Street. It will not be the death of finance. And it will not be the death of capitalism. These ideas and institutions will live on. What will not survive is macho. And the choice men will have to make, whether to accept or fight this new fact of history, will have seismic effects for all of humanity—women as well as men.

For several years now it has been an established fact that, as behavioral finance economists Brad Barber and Terrance Odean memorably demonstrated in 2001, of all the factors that might correlate with overconfident investment in financial markets—age, marital status, and the like—the most obvious culprit was having a Y chromosome. And now it turns out that not only did the macho men of the heavily male-dominated global finance sector create the conditions for global economic collapse, but they were aided and abetted by their mostly male counterparts in government whose policies, whether consciously or not, acted to artificially prop up macho.

One such example is the housing bubble, which has now exploded most violently in the West. That bubble actually represented an economic policy that disguised the declining prospects of blue-collar men. In the United States, the booming construction sector generated relatively high-paying jobs for the relatively less-skilled men who made up 97.5 percent of its workforce—\$814 a week on average. By contrast, female-dominated jobs in healthcare support pay \$510 a week, while retail jobs pay about \$690 weekly. The housing bubble created nearly 3 million more jobs in residential construction than would have existed otherwise, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Other, mostly male-dominated, industries, such as real estate, cement production, truck transport, and architecture, saw big employment gains as well. These handsome construction wages allowed men to maintain an economic edge over women. When policymakers are asked why they didn't act to stem the housing bubble's inflation, they invariably cite the fact that the housing sector was a powerful driver of employment. Indeed, subsidizing macho had all kinds of benefits, and to puncture the housing bubble would have been political suicide.



And yet, the housing bubble is just the latest in a long string of efforts to prop up macho, the most powerful of which was the New Deal, as historian Gwendolyn Mink has argued. At the height of the Great Depression in 1933, 15 million Americans were unemployed out of a workforce that was roughly 75 percent male. This undermined the male breadwinner model of the family, and there was tremendous pressure to bring it back. The New Deal did just that by focusing on job creation for men. Insulating women from the market by keeping them in the home became a mark of status for men—a goal most fully realized in the postwar nuclear family (Rosie the Riveter was a blip). In this way, according to historian Stephanie Coontz, the Great Depression and the New Deal reinforced traditional gender roles: Women were promised economic security in exchange for the state's entrenchment of male economic power.

Today, this old bargain has come undone, and no state intervention will restore it. Indeed, the U.S. economic stimulus package no longer bears much resemblance to a New Deal-style public-works program. Despite early talk that the stimulus would stress shovel-ready infrastructure projects, high-speed rail lines, and other efforts that would bolster heavily male sectors of the economy, far more of the money is going—directly or indirectly—to education, healthcare, and other social services. Already in the United States, women make up nearly half of biological and medical scientists and nearly three quarters of health-industry workers. No less an authority than U.S. President Barack Obama has weighed in on the shift of power from men to women, telling the *New York Times* that, though construction and manufacturing jobs won't vanish altogether, "they will constitute a smaller percentage of the overall economy." As a result, he said, "Women are just as likely to be the primary bread earner, if not more likely, than men are today."

What this all means is that the problem of macho run amok and excessively compensated is now giving way to macho unemployed and undirected—a different but possibly just as destructive phenomenon. Long periods of unemployment are a strong predictor of heavy drinking, especially for men ages 27 to 35, a study in *Social Science & Medicine* found last year. And the macho losers of globalization can forget about marrying: "Among the workers who disproportionately see their jobs moving overseas or disappearing into computer chips," says sociologist Andrew Cherlin, "we'll see fewer young adults who think they can marry." So the disciplining effects of marriage for young men will continue to fade.

Surly, lonely, and hard-drinking men, who feel as though they have been rendered historically obsolete, and who long for lost identities of macho, are already common in ravaged post-industrial landscapes across the world, from America's Rust Belt to the post-Soviet wreckage of Vladimir Putin's Russia to the megalopolises of the Middle East. If this recession has any staying power, and most believe it does, the massive psychic trauma will spread like an inkblot.

How will this shift to the post-macho world unfold? That depends on the choices men make, and they only have two.

The first is adaptation: men embracing women as equal partners and assimilating to the new cultural sensibilities, institutions, and egalitarian arrangements that entails. That's not to say that all the men in the West will turn into metrosexuals while football ratings and beer sales plummet. But amid the death of macho, a new model of manhood may be emerging, especially among some educated men living in the affluent West.

Economist Betsey Stevenson has described the decline of an older kind of marriage, in which men specialized in market labor while women cared for children,

in favor of “consumption” marriage, “where both people are equally contributing to production in the marketplace, but they are matching more on shared desires on how to consume and how to live their lives.” These marriages tend to last longer, and they tend to involve a more even split when it comes to household duties.

Not coincidentally, the greater adaptability of educated men in family life extends to economic life, too. Economist Eric D. Gould found in 2004 that marriage tends to make men (particularly lower-wage earners) more serious about their careers—more likely to study more, work more, and desire white-collar rather than blue-collar jobs. This adaptation of men may be the optimistic scenario, but it’s not entirely far-fetched.

Then, however, there’s the other choice: resistance. Men may decide to fight the death of macho, sacrificing their own prospects in an effort to disrupt and delay a powerful historical trend. There are plenty of precedents for this. Indeed, men who have no constructive ways of venting their anger may become a source of nasty extremism; think of the kgb nostalgists in Russia or the jihadi recruits in search of lost honor, to name just a couple. And there are still plenty of men in the West who want to “stand athwart history, yelling Stop.” These guys notwithstanding, however, Western developed countries are not for the most part trying to preserve the old gender imbalances of the macho order this time around.

Instead, the choice between adaptation and resistance may play out along a geopolitical divide: While North American and Western European men broadly—if not always happily—adapt to the new egalitarian order, their counterparts in the emerging giants of East and South Asia, not to mention in Russia, all places where women often still face brutal domestic oppression, may be headed for even more exaggerated gender inequality. In those societies, state power will be used not to advance the interests of women, but to keep macho on life support.

Look at Russia, where just such an effort has been unfolding for the past decade. Although there are 10.4 million more Russian women than men, this hasn’t translated into political or economic power. After the Soviet collapse, the ideal of women’s equality was abandoned almost entirely, and many Russians revived the cult of the full-time homemaker (with Putin’s government even offering bonus payments for childbearing women). But Russian men, floored by the dislocations of the Soviet collapse and a decade of economic crisis, simply couldn’t adapt. “It was common for men to fall into depression and spend their days drinking and lying on the couch smoking,” Moscow writer Masha Lipman observes. Between their tremendously high rates of mortality, incarceration, and alcoholism and their low rates of education, only a small handful of Russian men were remotely able (or willing) to serve as sole breadwinners.

This left Russia’s resilient women to do the work, while being forced to accept skyrocketing levels of sexual exploitation at work and massive hypocrisy at home. A higher percentage of working-age women are employed in Russia than nearly any other country, Elena Mezentseva of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies has found, but as of 2000, they were making only half the wages that Russian men earned for the same work. All the while, Putin has aided and abetted these men, turning their nostalgia for the lost macho of Soviet times into an entire ideology.

If this represents a nightmare scenario for how the death of macho could play out, another kind of threatening situation is unfolding in China. The country’s \$596 billion economic stimulus package bears a far stronger resemblance to a New Deal-style public-works program than anything the U.S. Democratic Party has devised. Whereas healthcare and education have attracted the bulk of U.S. stimulus dollars, more than 90 percent of the Chinese stimulus is going to construction: of low-income homes, highways, railroads, dams, sewage-treatment plants, electricity grids, airports, and much else.

This frenzy of spending is designed to contain the catastrophic damage caused by the loss of manufacturing jobs in China’s export sector. The Chinese Communist Party has long seen the country’s 230 million migrant workers, roughly two thirds of whom are men, as a potential source of political unrest. Tens of millions have lost manufacturing jobs already, and so far they’ve proved unwilling or unable to return to their native provinces.

Just as the housing bubble in the United States was a pro-male policy, China’s economic trajectory over the past two decades is deeply tied to its effort to manage the threat posed by the country’s massive male migrant population. Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist Yasheng Huang has argued that while the first decade after Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms saw tremendous economic growth and entrepreneurship in the Chinese hinterlands, the next two decades have seen a marked decline in the economic prospects of rural China coupled with a concerted effort to promote the rapid development of China’s coastal cities. State-owned enterprises and multinational corporations enjoyed generous subsidies, tax abatements, and other insider deals, and in return, they employed millions of migrants. The trade-off exacerbated China’s internal migration, as millions of men fled rural poverty in search of short-term urban employment, but after the Tiananmen Square uprising, Chinese elites welcomed it as a way to stave off urban unrest.

Today, however, it’s hard to see how Chinese leaders can safely unravel this bargain. Matters are made worse by China’s skewed population—there are 119 male births for every 100 female—and the country has already seen violent protests from its increasingly alienated young men. Of course, it’s possible that China will constructively channel this surplus of macho energy in the direction of entrepreneurship, making the country a global source of radical innovation, with all the military implications that entails. More likely, if the nature of China’s stimulus is any indication, Beijing will continue trying to prop up its urban industrial economy—for if this outlet for macho crumbles, there is good reason to believe that the Communist Party will crumble with it.

It might be tempting to think that the death of macho is just a cyclical correction and that the alpha males of the financial world will all be back to work soon. Tempting, but wrong. The “penis competition” made possible by limitless leverage, arcane financial instruments, and pure unadulterated capitalism will now be domesticated in lasting ways.

The recession is creating points of agreement among people not typically thought of as kindred spirits, from behavioral economists to feminist historians. But while many blame men for the current economic mess, much of the talk thus far has focused on the recession’s effects on women. And they are real. Women

had a higher global unemployment rate before the current recession, and they still do. This leads many to agree with a U.N. report from earlier this year: “The economic and financial crisis puts a disproportionate burden on women, who are often concentrated in vulnerable employment and tend to have lower unemployment and social security benefits, and have unequal access to and control over economic and financial resources.”

This is a valid concern, and not incompatible with the fact that billions of men worldwide, not just a few discredited bankers, will increasingly lose out in the new world taking shape from the current economic wreckage. As women start to gain more of the social, economic, and political power they have long been denied, it will be nothing less than a full-scale revolution the likes of which human civilization has never experienced.

This is not to say that women and men will fight each other across armed barricades. The conflict will take a subtler form, and the main battlefield will be hearts and minds. But make no mistake: The axis of global conflict in this century will not be warring ideologies, or competing geopolitics, or clashing civilizations. It won't be race or ethnicity. It will be gender. We have no precedent for a world after the death of macho. But we can expect the transition to be wrenching, uneven, and possibly very violent.

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