



Munk Debate on the End of Men Post-Debate Commentary

By Stephanie Coontz

The debaters were witty and articulate, but their claims were often contradictory. While the audience may have had fun, they received little accurate information.

Defenders of the proposition that men are obsolete told us that women are becoming the dominant sex. Sometimes Hanna Rosin and Maureen Dowd portrayed men as slackers and sulkers, holding up Toronto's hapless mayor as an exemplar of the modern male. At other times (joined by Camille Paglia), they depicted men as the unfortunate victims of feminized schools, feminist harridans, and man-eating femmes fatales.

On the con side, Caitlin Moran countered that patriarchy is still alive and well, claiming that men hold 99 percent of the world's wealth. Camille Paglia argued that we should shore up masculinity because we still need men to defend our turf, do the dirty work that keeps industrial societies going, and let us focus on being women.

What are the facts? Women have indeed made dramatic progress in overturning discriminatory barriers, but they have not become the richer sex, even in the most advanced industrial nations. Women's wages climbed faster than men's for the past three decades, but they started from a much lower base and still have not caught up. The median hourly wage for women in the U.S. rose from less than 63 percent that of men in 1979 to almost 83 percent by 2012. But on average a woman needs to

work 52 years to earn the same income a man can make in 40 years.

<http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/Economic-Issues/trends-in-global-gender-equity.html>

Today women earn nearly 60 percent of university degrees, and a female college graduate's salary is typically higher than a male high school graduate's, unlike decades past. Yet at every educational level, fulltime female workers still earn less than men with the *same* credentials.

<http://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2011/03/24/gender-gaps-by-education-and-age/>

That said, we are certainly not in the grip of a millennium-old patriarchy. Moran rightly pointed out the continuing worldwide subjugation of women, but her claim that men own 99 percent of the world's wealth is wrong. Even ignoring the joint property rights that married women have won, and excluding all the female entrepreneurs and heiresses around the world, sociologist Philip Cohen calculates that unmarried women in the U.S. *alone* earn more than 1 percent of the world's total wealth. <http://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2011/09/26/getting-beyond-1/>

Men in advanced industrial societies have lost or voluntarily relinquished many traditional patriarchal prerogatives. In the U.S., domestic violence rates have declined by 53 percent since the early 1990s, and sexual assaults have dropped by 70 percent. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/fvv.pdf> Married men have tripled the time they spend on childcare and housework since the 1960s.

A less positive aspect of changing gender relations is that in many countries women's relative improvement in employment stems less from their absolute progress than from men's losses. In the United States, more than a quarter of

women's gains relative to men results from men's *declining* wages.

<http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/Economic-Issues/the-wrong-route-to-equality-mens-declining-wages.html>

Inequality between high- and low-wage earners has been growing for women and men alike, with destabilizing effects on individuals and families.

<http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/Economic-Issues/men-against-women-or-the-top-20-percent-against-the-bottom-80.html>

Yet too many people think it's obsolete to insist that people who do the less-skilled but essential work in our economies – janitors, industrial workers, retail clerks, food workers -- deserve a living wage, along with social protections that allow them to meet family obligations.

I agree with Camille Paglia that we ought to revalue the trades where men once earned a secure living. But we should equally value the work performed by nursery school teachers, health care aides, secretaries, and daycare workers. Reviving traditional notions of masculinity is not the way to revitalize working-class communities.

In fact, such notions increasingly hold men back. Most of the problems boys have in school stem from the retrograde masculine mystique that “real boys” don't study. One reason for men's lower enrollment and higher dropout rates in college is the assumption that men do not need as much education as women in order to make a good living.

Old forms of gender advantage often backfire today. Men who drop out of college earn entry-level salaries comparable to those of male college graduates. Women dropouts, by contrast, are immediately penalized, with starting salaries on average \$6,500 per year less than women college grads. But this initial gender “privilege” for men imposes heavy long-term costs. By midlife, most male college dropouts earn

less than college graduates of either gender.

<http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/Gender-Sexuality/why-dont-men-finish-college-as-often-as-women-press-release.html>.

Men are not obsolete. What's obsolete are the twin notions that men and women have different needs, capacities, and values and that the rise of women is a threat to men. As Caitlin Moran pointed out, we're in this together. The closer women get to equality, the better off are their partners, sons, and brothers.

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The Munk Debates wished to thank Ali Wyne for his assistance in commissioning and compiling these essays. Ali Wyne is an associate of the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. A frequent commentator on international affairs, he is a coauthor of *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (2013).

www.munkdebates.com/debates/The-End-of-Men

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