

Is Male Dominance Jeopardizing the Survival of the Human Race?

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All over the world, women challenging male ascendancy normally base their case on legal arguments. They decry the unjust distribution of power between men and women and largely rely on the cogency of their case that no one should be disadvantaged or favoured because of her or his sex. But is the problem really just one of justice? Should we not be seeking to end the dominance of men because this jeopardizes the very survival of humanity?

To answer that we need to consider the major threats facing our world today. I have chosen to focus on just three such threats, without implying anything about their order of priority.

Firstly, in 1950 the world population totalled some 2.5 billion, by 1975 it had risen to 4.5 billion and current estimates place it at 6 billion, despite the fact that policy-makers have been trying to contain this growth for 30 years and more. The dangers flowing from this trend are all too evident. With food production lagging behind population growth, many parts of the world are threatened with famine and mass migration, which in turn heightens the risk of war breaking out. Above all, however, uninhibited population growth imperils the natural resources on which life on this Earth depends. More and more forests are cut down to make way for built-up areas and farmland, even though we are well aware of the negative impact on the world's climate. Continuing industrialization also means our natural environment is increasingly contaminated. The increase in carbon dioxide emissions due to the rise in worldwide car ownership is just one such example.

Secondly, the population explosion is itself generating increasing environmental pollution. The fertilizers used to increase food production end up contaminating our groundwater, rivers and seas. Increasing CO₂ emissions are playing their part in the climate change that has already halved the thickness of the icecap at the North Pole within just 20 years. Scientists fear this could cause the Gulf Stream to cool down or change course, with ominous implications particularly for the European climate. Many climatologists have already said they believe the torrential rains which fell in the Czech Republic, Austria, Germany and France in the summer of 2002 and the flood disasters they caused were consequences of man-made climatic changes.

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Thirdly, Violence, terror and war pose another formidable danger. As long as wars were fought only with axes and spears or later with guns and tanks, the future of humanity as a whole was not at stake. Even World War I, in which millions died, did not leave scars of the kind that would be felt for generations to come. However, since Hiroshima the world we live in has changed. And we have not even witnessed a large-scale deployment of modern chemical or biological weapons, let alone the destructive force of today's nuclear bombs. The fact that a growing number of countries, including military dictatorships, possess such weapons of mass destruction cannot be anything other than a cause of grave concern.

There is a broad consensus that these three issues pose the main threats to human life on Earth. But what does this all have to do with male dominance? Let us turn first to over-population.

Birth control campaigns used to target women only. However, bodies like the United Nations and the World Health Organization eventually realized that this approach was inadequate to the task. Since birth control also meant preventing conception, no headway was possible in the face of male opposition. However, particularly in the developing countries husbands tend to want many more children than their wives do. According to research by the German Foundation for World Population (DSW), this preference is due, firstly, to the traditional belief that a large number of children is proof of male potency and, secondly, to the fear that wives who guard against unwanted pregnancy might be more likely to be unfaithful.

There is another interesting fact the demographers have discovered. The better educated women are, and the better their prospects of learning and getting a job, the more quickly the birth rate falls. In the state of Kerala in India, for example, where women have had access to education and job prospects for decades, the average birth rate is just 2.1 children per woman. In a general observation, a positive correlation has been found between joint responsibility being taken for family planning and the woman's level of education. By way of contrast, in strongly engrained macho cultures a large proportion of couples do not even talk about contraception. In those parts of India where male dominance remains unchallenged, birth rates are correspondingly higher, averaging three to five children per woman.

The relationship between the education of women and over-population is brought out especially clearly if the number of births to teenagers (aged 15-19) is taken as an indicator. In European countries such as Germany or Italy in which virtually all teenagers attend secondary education at least until they are fifteen, the birth rate in this age group is 3-5 per 1,000 young women. At the opposite extreme, we find African countries such as Niger, Guinea, Senegal and Kenya. In these countries, no

more than one quarter of 15-19-year-old females achieve minimum European educational standards, and the number of births to this age-group is higher by a factor of 1.5-2.5.

Can any similar trends be observed where environmental issues are concerned? One thing at least can be said with some certainty in the international arena: organizations in which women play a predominant role have led the way in making both the general public and political leaders aware of the dangers of environmental pollution and the plundering of the Earth's resources. Two thirds to three quarters of the members of environmental organizations are women, a fact that often goes unnoticed because it is still the case that the people at the top, those in the public eye, are generally men.

Scientists explain women's greater environmental awareness by pointing out that they are more directly confronted with the impact of pollution than men are. Examples include children's allergies, the contamination of breast milk and problems in obtaining drinking water. At a recent conference on protecting the environment, an African delegate ventured the opinion that there would be no water crisis at all in Third World if it were the men's job to fetch the water from the well. In general, the time they spend looking after their families and homes sharpens women's awareness of the harm humanity is doing to the environment and, for example, of the scale on which we discard packaging waste. On the other hand, it is an unmistakable fact that the vast majority of the people in industrial firms, planning authorities, forestry or waste disposal who make the decisions that harm the environment are men. There is good reason to doubt whether women, in these same positions of responsibility, would have decided the same way.

And who is responsible for the fact that we live in such huge fear of violence, terror and war, despite all our efforts to curb these phenomena? Criminological research provides some interesting insights into violence, in those contexts in which we define it as criminal. Some 80-90% of the rise in recorded violent crime in Germany and other European countries since the mid-1980s can be ascribed to men. In spite of the pronounced social upheaval during this period, women have largely managed to stick to the straight and narrow. Although police statistics on violent crime do show a certain increase in the number of women involved, the increase among young men aged 18-21 has risen far faster, and their total number is now 13 times greater. This is somewhat surprising given that women are now claiming their place in a host of formerly male bastions such as the police force, army, fire brigade or combative sports. As a parallel development, their criminal behaviour had also been widely expected to change inexorably as well, but the assumption was mistaken. Women today make up a mere 4-5% of the prison population – the same proportion as 20 years ago. Men still account for more than 95% of the small group of those who have

killed a large number of people all at once, say in a shooting spree or suicide bombing. Likewise, male dominance is continuing to grow in the area in which the violence is directed only against the self: British statistics indicate a slight decline in the young female suicide rate over the past 20 years, whereas the rate is reported in the press to have risen by 60% for young males in the same period. Similar trends are also reported in Germany, where the ratio of male to female suicides used to be 2:1 but is now 3:1.

All this combined points to a crisis of masculine identity. One of the root causes appears to be the discrepancy between young men's daydreams and the reality of the world around them. Rambo-type figures who get their way by force are celebrated in the media and become powerful role models. But everyday life at school, in training, at the workplace calls for men of a quite different type – who are good team-workers, have good communicative and emotional skills, and see no problem in having a woman as their boss.

The situation is exacerbated, especially in an urban environment, by the factor of inter-cultural conflict. A growing proportion of the young men in western European countries belong to immigrant families in which traditional notions of masculinity prevail. As head of the family, the father is often a dominant figure who demands obedience from his wife and children and is wont to use violence to enforce it. A representative survey of schoolchildren carried out in 13 German cities and rural districts by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony found that physical violence was twice to three times as common among families with a former-Yugoslav or Turkish background as it was in native German families. In turn, the survey demonstrated that growing up in a macho culture of this type is a strong contributory factor to the substantially more frequent use of violence observed among youths with a Turkish or "Yugoslav" background.

Another striking fact is the difference in the criminal careers of men and women. Women seem to be more capable than men of learning social competence. In all categories of crime their recidivism rate (the incidence of re-offending) is far lower. Hardly surprisingly, repeat offenders who have been convicted at least ten times are nearly all men.

It is also interesting to observe what impact a higher ratio of women may have in certain occupations. In Britain, for example, a higher ratio of women police or prison officers was matched by a marked decline in complaints about police violence and disciplinary problems in prisons. Evidently, women are better at seeking peaceful ways of resolving any conflicts that arise.

A broadly similar picture is revealed by research carried out by Hamburg criminologist Klaus Sessar, who found that women judges and public prosecutors were much more open to ideas of restitution and victim-offender mediation than men. Moreover, in a nationwide survey of German juvenile judges and public prosecutors, the female respondents took a far more critical view of the system of youth punishment than their male colleagues, also showing much greater interest in attending courses designed to give greater insight into the social background to conflict. The men, though, were more interested in courses concerned primarily with dogmatic aspects of the law. They are also in the majority among those calling for tough punishments, and are generally more likely than women to call for the reintroduction of the death penalty.

These findings regarding violent crime and attitudes towards it can certainly also be applied to the phenomena of terrorism and war. Just a glance at our recent past and the present day bears this out. The bombs in Northern Ireland, war in Yugoslavia, ETA's terror in Spain, September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington, and the continual struggle between Palestinians and Israelis: all of these are the acts almost entirely of men. The war-mongering grows out of macho cultures. As long as these attacks – brutal and disastrous as they are – are carried out using conventional weapons, with explosives or even the crash impact of aircraft, at least the casualties are confined to those immediately affected by the event. However, there is good reason to fear that people determined to unleash terror will get hold of weapons of mass destruction. Once religious fanaticism is added to this recipe, relieving the protagonists of any last inhibitions they may have about using such weapons, the macho cultures really do pose a fundamental existential threat.

Women, conversely, are the prime movers and organizers of protest demonstrations against terror and war. In Northern Ireland it was the women who led the campaign for peace, for which they received the Nobel Peace Prize. The Argentine mothers who demonstrated on behalf of their loved ones killed by the military junta displayed unforgettable courage and commitment. In Yugoslavia, too, it was the women who initiated the first public protests against the madness of the civil war. We can also go a little further back in time to the Third Reich, and will find that those with the courage to take in Jewish citizens who were strangers to them and give them refuge from the Gestapo were again predominantly women. A telling picture of this is provided by the findings of the American researcher Eva Fogelman. Indeed, we see the same factors at work today if we observe who is most willing to come to the aid of someone in distress on our public transport or on the street. The available research on this shows that the Good Samaritan, in reality, is a woman. Of course, there are men too who are ready to lend a hand and show courage in helping fellow citizens, but both of these virtues show through more strongly in women.

The marked difference between men and women in terms of attitude and behaviour raises the question of whether this is due to their very different upbringing or is genetically “hard wired”. Biologists, medical experts, anthropologists and other social scientists have been arguing the vexed question of nature or nurture for decades. The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama provided a broad-reaching and well-researched summary of current knowledge in his brilliant 1998 study *Women and the Evolution of World Politics*. In it, he concludes that, while a whole series of research findings allowed the biological-genetic approach to gain considerable ground in the last two decades of the 20th century, there is also abundant empirical evidence that the behavioural differences between men and women are the result of their different socialization and roles – although this can no longer suffice as the sole explanation as many continue to claim.

If, then, we have to assume that biological determining factors also play an important part here, how did they develop? One plausible hypothesis is that, even in the early millennia of human prehistory, the women who bore and successfully raised the most children would probably be those with pronounced maternal capabilities, i.e. those providing warmth, with good communication skills and strong protective instincts. More warlike, “amazon” types, on the other hand, will not have reproduced as effectively, being less able to provide their children on a stable basis with the attention, security and succour they needed. At the same time, the type of men with the best chance of being allowed to conceive children would be those able to show their prowess as fighters, so they would be able to defend their tribe, hunt wild animals and take possession of fertile land. There is a good deal of evidence that such behavioural patterns on the part of men and women have indeed been genetically inherited and persist in the world of today.

However, before readers gain the false impression that we now set our store solely by biological explanatory models, I would like to add some recent findings on the influence of upbringing from the representative youth survey already cited. The schoolchildren were asked in 1998 how their parents, friends and acquaintances would react if told that they had beaten up another youngster in the playground after a quarrel. Virtually all the girls expected to be severely reprimanded by their parents, and censured by most of their own age-group. In contrast, almost a quarter of the boys expected their fathers to tolerate or even praise them for their behaviour; over half also anticipated a positive reaction from their peer group.

Perhaps I might add a personal observation which made it clear to me how significant the old familiar parental behavioural roles remain to this day. Following a recent talk, nursery school teachers almost unanimously expressed their own observation that fathers in particular, but also mothers to some extent, respond very differently depending on whether a girl or a boy is in tears. With the girls, their urge to

console would be to the fore, whereas boys who cried would be much more likely to be fobbed off, or even scolded, with remarks like “Come on, big boys don’t cry!” or “What’s all this fuss about? You don’t want to be a cry-baby, do you?” What’s more, the nursery school teachers say that a lot of the children still replicate these behavioural patterns among themselves, even today. Both at home and at the nursery, they say, boys are taught very early on, also by their peers, to hold back tears and project a cool image. Many thus begin to build up armour against pain and hurt, whether it is inflicted on themselves or others: in effect, they learn to suppress feelings – including compassion. In contrast to this, the girls are much more likely to be allowed to fully express the rich variety of emotions with which they are born.

The survey of schoolchildren revealed another noteworthy fact: even in today’s Germany, where coeducation is the norm and girls enjoy broadly the same educational opportunities as boys, marked differences in behaviour persist. Asked what their favourite sports were and why, most boys preferred those that involved “man-to-man” confrontation with other players (football, rugby, handball) and enjoyed the thrill of beating their opponents. Some girls gave a similar response, but most preferred sports with a net or those not involving direct confrontation (e.g., volleyball or team dancing), getting their main enjoyment out of playing together and letting off steam.

That highlights a point repeatedly confirmed by research. Even with the progressing emancipation of women, the differences between the attitudes and behaviour of boys and girls, a legacy of the way humanity has evolved down the ages, will change only gradually.

What does that mean for today’s world? Given the notable risks associated with a culture of male domination, surely a strong drive for worldwide equality of opportunity between the sexes is sorely needed. We should remember, however, that a few isolated women in top positions will hardly be able to trigger a breakthrough for the qualities outlined here as typically feminine. These few are under far too much pressure to prove that they are as hard and tough-willed as the men. The impact of the gradual move to a greater prevalence of women in certain occupations in our western cultures will not begin to show through until their relative numbers have attained a “critical mass” such that individual women will no longer have to act as lone pioneers in an environment of male distrust.

On the other side of the coin, society needs men who can offer boys, who may be unsure what is expected of them, an appealing, credible alternative role model to the macho guy. We’re talking about men who are not afraid to show their feelings, who do not fight back tears, and yet who are strong all the same. These are men who listen and are willing to back down if they find they are in the wrong, and men who

are both relaxed and committed about performing so-called women's roles such as teaching in primary school or taking parental leave and doing the housework.

Given the dangers of male domination outlined here, feminists might campaign for the dominance of women instead. However, Francis Fukuyama disagrees, developing a cogent counter-argument from his research experience. He warns that we should not swing from one extreme to the other, as this could undermine a society's capability to defend itself. It is important to be conscious of the fact that macho cultures will remain a feature of our world for a long time to come. In an emergency, western democracies need to be ready to deploy armed force to stand up for themselves. Fukuyama argues that if women were the dominant policy-makers this might not be adequately assured. To sum up, it seems that the safest way forward is to strive for a true balance between male and female influence. Only then will we be able to turn the natural tension between the two sets of attitudes and behavioural patterns typical of the two sexes into positive momentum, able to engender constructive responses to the dangers outlined in the introductory passage.