

## Men's Lib

### To survive in a hostile world, guys need to embrace girly jobs and dirty diapers. Why it's time to reimagine masculinity at work and at home.

by [Andrew Romano](#) and [Tony Dokoupil](#) September 20, 2010

What's the matter with men? For years, the media have delivered the direst of prognoses. Men are “in decline.” Guys are getting “stiffed.” The “war on boys” has begun. And so on. This summer, *The Atlantic's* Hanna Rosin went so far as to declare that [“The End of Men”](#) is upon us.

There's certainly some substance to these claims. As the U.S. economy has transitioned from brawn to brain over the past three decades, a growing number of women have gone off to work. Men's share of the labor force has declined from 70 percent in 1945 to less than 50 percent today, and in the country's biggest cities, young, single, childless women—that is, the next generation—earn 8 percent more than their male peers. Women have matched or overtaken men as a percentage of students in college and graduate school, while men have retained their lead in alcoholism, suicide, homelessness, violence, and criminality. Factor in the Great Recession, which has [decimated male-heavy industries](#) like construction and manufacturing, and it's no wonder so many deadline anthropologists are down on men. But while the state of American manhood has inspired plenty of anxious trend pieces, few observers have bothered to address the obvious question: if men are going off the rails, how do they get back on track?

#### Man Up!

- [Why We Need to Reimagine Masculinity](#)
- [Ad Men: The Most Interesting Trend in the World](#)
- [Manhood USA: A Timeline of Male Ideals](#)
- [Why the New Macho is Good for Women](#)
- [For Black Men, Goal Remains the Same](#)

Without an answer, some men have turned to old models and mores of manhood for salvation. Rutgers University anthropologist Lionel Tiger, for example, wants to reclaim “maleness as a force, as a phenomenon.” Harvard government professor Harvey Mansfield advocates action and aggression. And the term “retrosexual” has all but replaced “metrosexual” in the lifestyle sections of national magazines, which are full of stories about affluent urbanites wearing hunting garb, buying designer axes, and writing about the art of manliness on blogs with names like (ahem) the Art of Manliness. Throwback masculinity dominates other media as well, with *The Dangerous Book for Boys* (a work of dad-and-lad shtick) and *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (a *cri de coeur* for manual labor) topping reading lists, and television shows such as *Dirty Jobs*, *Ax Men*, and *Deadliest Catch* re-romanticizing soot-collared work. A rapper's saggy jeans, a hunter's concealed weapon, a suburbanite's man cave, a hipster's obsession with Don Draper: all might be seen as variations of the same coping mechanism. The impulse transcends race and class.

But suggesting that men should stick to some musty script of masculinity only perpetuates the problem. For starters, it encourages them to confront new challenges the same way they dealt with earlier upheavals: by blaming women, retreating into the woods, or burying their anxieties beneath machismo. And it does nothing to help them succeed in school, secure sustainable jobs, or be better fathers in an economy that's rapidly outgrowing Marlboro Manliness.

The truth is, it's not how men [style themselves](#) that will make them whole again—it's what they do with their days. The riggers, welders, and boilermakers of generations past weren't wearing overalls to feel like men, as Susan Faludi, the author of books on both sexes, has pointed out. Instead, "their sense of their own manhood flowed out of their utility in a society, not the other way around," she writes. "Conceiving of masculinity as something to be"—a part to play—"turns manliness into [something] ornamental, and about as 'masculine' as fake eyelashes are inherently 'feminine.'?"

Since the 1950s, the image of the American woman has gone through numerous makeovers. But masculine expectations remain the same—even as there are fewer opportunities to fulfill them. As a result, says Joan C. Williams, author of *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*, "men have a choice: either feel inadequate or get a lot more creative." What's required, then, is not a reconnection with the past but a liberation from it; not a revival of the old role but an expansion of it. The End of Men isn't nigh, nor is macho dead. But its definition should be broadened to include both Mr. T and Mr. Mom. It's time, in other words, for a New Macho: a reimagining of what men should be expected to do in the two realms, home and work, that have always determined their worth.

Of course, that's easier said than done. American culture is competitive and conservative, and there are good reasons why inner-city fathers, hedge-fund honchos, and former GM plant managers aren't taking several months off from work to care for their kids—or exploring new fields, like nursing, where few of today's men dare to tread. Most guys, in fact, don't even need rescuing—at least not yet. They're still overrepresented in business and government, earn more on the dollar, open bigger movies, and clean fewer dishes.

But the gender wars aren't a zero-sum game: when men lose, women and children lose, too. So as women assume positions once occupied exclusively by men, and the more "manly" sectors of the U.S. economy continue to shrink, a more capacious notion of manhood—the product of both new policies and new attitudes—is no longer a luxury. In fact, it may be exactly what's needed to keep the American male, and America itself, competitive in the 21st century.

The home is a natural place to start. As the novelist Michael Chabon discovered on a trip to the grocery store with his son, society still expects very little from fathers. "You are such a good dad," a woman told him as he waited in line to pay. "I can tell." Exactly what she could tell was a mystery to Chabon, who recounts the story in his 2009 essay collection *Manhood for Amateurs*. But clearly no woman would earn kudos for toting her kids around the frozen-foods aisle. "The handy thing about being a father," he later concludes, "is that the historic standard is so pitifully low."

The modern standards aren't much better. Despite apparent progress—young couples believe in coparenting and sharing the household chores—very little has actually changed. The average wife still does roughly double the housework of the average husband: the equivalent of two full workdays of additional chores each week. Even when the man is unemployed, the woman handles a majority of the domestic workload, and it's the same story with child care. If both parents are working, women spend 400 percent more time with the kids. Meanwhile, the number of fatherless kids in America has nearly tripled since 1960, and the percentage of men who call themselves stay-at-home dads has stalled below 3 percent. The old roles, say sociologists, are hard to shake.

There's growing evidence, however, that they can be expanded. Consider contemporary family life in Sweden. In the past, new parents split 390 days of paid leave however they liked—monthly, weekly, daily, and even hourly. Women used far more of it than men. But today, new fathers no longer rush back to work, leaving the mother to raise little Sven all by herself. The reason for the change? Smart public policy.

In 1995, Sweden passed a simple but revolutionary law: couples would lose one month of leave unless the father was the one who took it. A second use-it-or-lose-it month was added in 2002, and now more than 80 percent of Swedish fathers take four months off for the birth of a new child, up from 4 percent a decade ago. And a full 41 percent of companies now formally encourage fathers to go on parental leave, up from only 2 percent in 1993. Simply put, men are expected to work less and father more.

By altering the roles of the Swedish father and the Swedish worker, Sweden's paternity-leave legislation has, in turn, rewritten the rules for Swedish men (and, by extension, women). "Swedish dads of my generation and younger have been raised to feel competent at child-rearing," writes Slate's Nathan Hegedus, an American who experienced the system firsthand. "They simply expect to do it, just as their wives and partners expect it of them." If a man refuses time at home with the kids, he faces questions from friends, family, and, yes, other guys. Policy changes produced personal changes—and then, slowly but surely, society changed as well.

Around the world, similar shifts are already underway. In Germany, the percentage of new fathers who take a break has jumped sevenfold since the country passed its own Swedish-style law in 2007. In Japan, which recently offered dads more paid baby time, the government honors dedicated fathers by spotlighting "stars of *ikumen*," or male child rearing. And with the passage of paid-leave laws in Britain (where Prime Minister David Cameron took several weeks off to care for his infant daughter) and Australia (which is hardly a dandified nation), the U.S. is now the only wealthy country that doesn't bankroll a bonding period for either parent.

This could change sooner than you think. Recent polls show that majorities of Republicans (62 percent), Democrats (92 percent), and independents (71 percent) now support the idea of paid paternity leave. Big companies—especially those with lots of male workers, such as Texas Instruments, Sun Microsystems, and Ernst & Young—are beginning to offer at least two weeks of paid leave. New Jersey, Washington, and California have already launched programs that offer partially paid leave, and more than 20 other states are currently considering legislation—a bloc that covers almost half the working population.

It's certain to grow, too, now that next year's federal budget includes a \$10 million State Paid Leave Fund to help states launch their own programs. The Family and Medical Leave Act, which granted unpaid leave to about half the workforce, followed a similar arc before it became the law of the land in 1993: a change in public opinion led to private-sector programs, which in turn triggered state reforms, which ultimately put pressure on Washington to act. The most likely model for paid leave is an employee-funded insurance program like Social Security—which, according to Heather Boushey, an economist at the Center for American Progress, could support 12 weeks of paid leave for a measly \$10 a month per worker. That translates to a payroll tax hike of no more than three 10ths of a percent. Even the most generous program—a full year of leave for every working parent in the country—would cost the country only \$25 billion, according to Columbia professor Jane Waldfogel, who studies work-family issues. Washington already spends four times that amount each year on fraud, waste, and abuse.

Of course, policy changes will be pointless unless attitudes change as well. In California, the first U.S. state to fund leave (six weeks of it) for both parents, only 26 percent of men seize the opportunity, compared with 73 percent of women. All told, most new fathers take off two weeks or less for a new child, no matter what. Baby time is simply not seen as masculine. The only way that perception will fade is if men who are already living double lives as dedicated professionals and parents "come out" and start writing their senators and petitioning their HR departments. The motivation is certainly there; over the last 35 years, the number of employed fathers in dual-earner families who say they suffer work-family conflict has risen from 35 percent to 59 percent, according to Joan Williams. Now it's up to "twenty-first century dads," as Jeremy Adam Smith argues in his recent book, *The Daddy Shift*, "to go on the offensive."

The campaign for a New Macho shouldn't end when men leave the house. The movie *Meet the Parents* is already 10 years old, but unfortunately, the way it deals with men and work doesn't seem dated at all. In one classic scene, the ingénue's banker ex-boyfriend questions her new flame (played by Ben Stiller) about his job. When it's revealed that Stiller is a nurse, however, the banker can't process it. The idea that a

marriageable man would work as a nurse is so inconceivable that he assumes nursing is a hobby. “That’s great to give something back like that,” he says finally. “I’d love to find time to do volunteer work.” Men can no longer afford to make such assumptions. Of the 15.3 million new jobs projected to sprout up over the next decade, the vast majority will come in fields that currently attract far more women than men. In fact, men dominate only two of the 12 job titles expected to grow the most between 2008 and 2018: construction worker and accountant. The rest, including teachers (501,000 new positions), registered nurses (582,000), home health aides (461,000), and customer-service reps (400,000), remain heavily female. All told, the social sector of the economy will gain 6.9 million jobs by 2018. But unless the complexion of the workforce changes, according to a recent study by Northeastern University, a whopping 2.5 million of them will go unfilled.

The coming employment gap represents a huge opportunity for working-class guys—and for the families they’re struggling to support. The problem is that men, unlike many women, still feel limited to a narrow range of acceptable roles—a range that hasn’t kept pace with the changing employment landscape. As manufacturing continues to migrate overseas and underpaid immigrants continue to provide cheap manual labor, they continue to lose ground.

The current recession has only aggravated the trend. Historically, women have been far more likely than men to exit the labor force after losing their jobs. But men are now catching up, with 1.4 million shifting from “looking for work” to “stopped looking” in the last month alone. Discouraged by the dearth of “manly” work, they’ve simply given up. New high-school and college graduates have it even worse: the unemployment rate among young men is a dismal 20.5 percent—a full 3 points higher than the rate among their female peers.

It’s possible to imagine protectionist trade and immigration policies boosting blue-collar employment at the margins. But the U.S. can’t stop globalization. If male morale—and the American economy—are ever going to recover, the truth is that the next generation of Homer Simpsons will have to stop searching for outsourced manufacturing jobs and start working toward teaching, nursing, or social-service positions instead. To hasten this transition, schools that train “nurturing professionals” should launch aggressive, male-oriented advertising campaigns and male-to-male recruiting drives that stress technical expertise, career-advancement potential, and beyond-the-bedside opportunities. Community colleges ought to focus on preparing students for the social-sector jobs of the future. Certain institutions might even consider raising their admissions requirements, a tactic that has helped the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing increase its male-applicant pool by 34 percent over the past five years. And the government should fund or incentivize as many of these initiatives as it possibly can.

The shift could prove less wrenching than it sounds, once men are willing to try. Nearly two thirds of the 30 biggest growth occupations require only on-the-job training, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, saving men from the long, expensive process of returning to school. Historically, token men have also had less trouble than token women breaking into a field dominated by the opposite sex—and less trouble finding a niche once they’ve been hired. While women in traditionally male professions suffer predictable forms of discrimination, men in women’s fields actually enjoy “structural advantages” that “tend to enhance their careers”—a kind of glass conveyor belt that carries them into the “more masculine” areas they perceive to be a better fit for their talents, according to a seminal 1992 study. They become gym teachers instead of English teachers; reference librarians instead of children’s librarians; ER nurses instead of pediatric nurses.

Skeptics will argue that men are “designed” for some gigs and not for others. But while no one would claim that men and women don’t have their differences, women long ago proved that gender essentialism doesn’t determine what kind of work they can do. Today women still serve as teachers, nurses, and social workers. But they’re also CEOs, soldiers, and secretaries of state. The time has come for a similar expansion of what men can do for a living. The raw numbers show that a change is already underway; the percentage of nurses who are men has doubled over the past 25 years (to about 6 percent of the field), and there are more guys teaching elementary school than ever before. But it’s not nearly enough. Mining and machinist jobs will still be available in the future—just not as many. Why wouldn’t men look elsewhere for work?

Until recently, the concept of masculinity had always bent to the demands of the day. Before 1776, according to the historical sociologist Michael Kimmel, the perfect man was still a genteel patriarch, a dandified landowner steeped in the codes of the Old World. By the early 19th century that ideal had given way to the image of the heroic artisan, the rugged individualist (a farmer, a cobbler, a carpenter) who might lead a caravan west. In time, the log-cabin model was replaced by a more modern ideal: the self-made man, a restless, competitive breadwinner whose masculinity depended on success in an industrial, materialistic society.

It's clear that we've arrived at another crossroads—only today the prevailing codes of manhood have yet to adjust to the changing demands on men. We're not advocating a genderless society, a world in which men are "just like women." We're not even averse to decorative manhood, or the kind of escapism that men have turned to again and again—think Paul Bunyan, Tarzan, and bomber jackets—when the actual substance of their lives felt light. If today's men want to be hunters, or metrosexuals, or metrosexuals dressed in hunting clothes, they should feel free.

But they need to be more than that, too. On the surface, the New Macho is a paradox, a path to masculinity paved with girly jobs and dirty diapers. Dig a little deeper, however, and it begins to make a lot of sense—not just for men but for everyone. If men embraced parental leave, women would be spared the stigma of the "mommy track"—and the professional penalties (like lower pay) that come along with it. If men were involved fathers, more kids might stay in school, steer clear of crime, and avoid poverty as adults. And if the country achieved gender parity in the workplace—an optimal balance of fully employed men and women—the gross domestic product would grow by as much as 9 percent, according to a recent study by the World Economic Forum.

Ultimately, the New Macho boils down to a simple principle: in a changing world, men should do whatever it takes to contribute their fair share at home and at work, and schools, policymakers, and employers should do whatever they can to help them. After all, what's more masculine: being a strong, silent, unemployed absentee father, or actually fulfilling your half of the bargain as a breadwinner and a dad?