

The plight of the other sex

BY LIZ TORLÉE

Confused by their domestic, personal and professional roles, some men are retreating from society

It's time, perhaps, to talk about "the other sex" again-still struggling for identity and respect, weary of stereotyping, unsure about accepted behaviour in and out of the office, in and out of love. That's men, of course. Today's men are a complex and fascinating bunch, and they are often gravely misunderstood.

In the past 20 to 30 years, women have had all the attention or, at least, all the lip service. Much has been written of their gutsy liberation, their influence on discretionary spending, their lobbying and boycotting power. Smart marketers have listened carefully and revamped their strategies to reflect and channel this formidable clout, with well-deserved success.

But meanwhile, something unsettling is happening to the other sex. From recent work, it's clear that many men are experiencing what anthropologists call "decentred identities"-the unsettling realization that they have no dominant purpose or organizing goal in their lives. Of course, we all experience this, especially with today's conflicting priorities. But for these men, the impact of changing social structures and the unpredictable rules of etiquette are leaving them confused and, increasingly, withdrawn.

Some men (usually in their late 40s to early 60s) claim they have tried to be what everybody wants and end up pleasing no one. They have little "sense of belonging" as one put it. What makes this worse, they say, is the reaction of the women in their lives. To quote a few from recent discussions: "Cry me a river." "Go tell it on the mountain." "Welcome to the club." One man, reduced to tears by the death of his dog, was encouraged very strongly by his wife to "like, get over it." "The appeal of vulnerability," he lamented "lasts five minutes." We women, it seems, want men to be strong and sensitive, macho and vulnerable, to leap to our defence while vehemently endorsing our independence. A guy gets confused.

According to some, the gender fairness pendulum has swung back with such righteous zeal that it's sprung off its hinges. Men are now portrayed in advertising as intellectually challenged, popcorn-eating couch potatoes, while their poor female partners are encouraged to dream up formulas for the perfect mate. Or, they're zoned out idiots who can't make simple decisions about their tax returns. When they do try to be sensitive and caring (Dad's turn to cook dinner, for example), they make the kitchen look like a scene from *Animal House*.

Imagine the shoe on the foot of the other gender for a moment- women would be up in arms and rightly so. But this type of communication-guy as pig, dolt or hapless, messy fool-is absorbed with barely a whimper by both the advertising community and those it seeks to reach. Some men try to shrug it off by rationalizing it's their turn, but others are far less philosophical. They keep quiet because they claim no one would listen anyway-and that is far more worrying.

Men often lack the social structure in their lives to help them deal with their anxieties. Women can work things out by talking to friends but for men, friendship seems to be a rare and tentative thing. It needs an excuse-sports, for example-that both stimulates and facilitates conversation. But not all men have sports interests that connect them with others and even those who do will rarely venture into truly personal territory.

The feelings expressed by women on their journey of liberation- resentment, anger, defiance and a fierce determination for change- were eventually embraced under the umbrella of social justice. While the issues for men may not seem so profound, the very idea of their becoming resentful, angry and defiant for any reason at all would likely be met with derision.

In a recent British study, 19% of women claim they want to come back in their next life as men, but a whopping 60% of men want to be women next time. Perhaps the Brits are a breed apart, but this should give us all pause. Could it be it's really a woman's world now? Absolutely, according to many men. They cite very concrete examples of discrimination or having been "passed over" in the working world for being on the wrong side of affirmative action. According to Dr. Victor Barac, a cultural anthropologist and lecturer at the University of Toronto: "There is a new wedge between the sexes now. Men sense that when they hit 40, no one really needs them any more."

All this could be dismissed as new growing pains (as in "for heaven's sake grow up" as one woman put it), but there's a strong recurring theme in much of the work in this area: retreat. Men are not fighting, they are withdrawing. This is particularly apparent in the stories they tell of thwarted relationships, their claims that they have tried hard to be the right kind of guy, only to wake up and realize one day that they are getting absolutely nothing back. When this sinks in, they retreat-to hobbies, to books, to music, to their own company. "My old tabby cat and I," said one of them "are getting on just fine."

While there are damning statistics that suggest women still have an uphill battle for social and marketplace equality, it is nevertheless a sad irony that many of the gains they now enjoy have come not only with the full support of men, but at their expense.

Perhaps this is just the natural course of a changing culture. The pendulum usually swings a bit too energetically when striving for balance. But while we're all waiting for balance, we should start showing a little more interest in what seems to be a growing but eerily silent group smack in the middle of our national demographics. And when they do speak, we should listen a lot more carefully.

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