

Men and Women: Should We Just Call the Whole Thing Off?

Marriage is in decline. This fact is by now so familiar to conservatives that they may be tempted to gloss over an interesting shift in the *manner* of marriage's decline.

Thirty years ago, Americans were getting married but [not staying that way](#). Today divorce rates are down but wedding bells are also in less demand. Growing numbers of young people are simply staying single. There's evidence they're becoming less interested [even in casual sex](#).

Are men and women giving up on each other? It's starting to feel that way. In the vitriol of the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, the #MeToo movement, and our ongoing discussions of "[incels](#)," "[NEETs](#)," and [absent fathers](#), we see rising levels of frustration and rage, often directed indiscriminately from one sex towards the other. Making relationships work has always been a challenge—even casual human interactions can sometimes be a challenge. So what if people decide that it's just not worth it anymore?

A few years back, I became aware of that countercultural strain of identity politics known as the "men's rights movement." I first encountered it on social media, of course, and in a quest to grasp its red-pilled logic, I spent some time wandering the fever swamps of male grievance, noting the many interesting parallels between virulent masculinism and the more radical strains of feminism. It added an interesting layer to my perspective on our ongoing war of sexes.

It's well worth noting that both masculinism and feminism, at least in their more extreme forms, are fundamentally materialist in their logic. Feminism draws regularly on Marxist ideologies, reducing complex social relations to an

endless war of classes vying for power. For masculinists, sociobiology is the more defining influence, as huge swaths of culture and custom are reduced to mere expressions of the Darwinian imperative to procreate. It all makes sense, on reflection. Aggrieved women, resenting the natural vulnerability of their bodies, are attracted to political theories that call for the leveling of power disparities. Aggrieved men, by contrast, hope to find in the male body a kind of warrant for dominance, which is bestowed by biology and ostensibly crucial to the survival of the species. Peeling back the layers, it seems that gender crusaders of both types are intensely fixated on brute corporeal realities: the strength of man and the comparative neediness of woman.

I noticed something else, too, in my journey through the manosphere. I'd had occasion to note before that militant feminists tended to be *disagreeably* female in their mannerisms, exemplifying many of the vices that are most characteristic of women. This is particularly obvious in the more misandrist corners of the feminist world (for instance, where people debate whether non-exploitative heterosexual sex is *in principle* impossible, or whether it might theoretically happen in a radically different sort of society where the patriarchy has truly been defanged). The women in these circles seemed morbidly emotional, catty, and a mess of hair-trigger sensitivities. You couldn't possibly mistake them for men, but calling them "feminine" felt like a disservice to my sex.

Sizing up militant man advocates, I saw a fascinating mirror image. They seemed boorish, rage-prone, and obsessed with one-upping each other. They were everything women find most noxious in men. Girls would never exhibit such behavior, but it surely did not qualify as "manly."

These sad cross-sections of society give us a glimpse of a significant truth about the sexes. We're better off together. Even the apparent exceptions, examined closely, usually

aren't. The [men of Mount Athos](#) or the [Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration](#) may appear to live in single-sex worlds. But the former regard themselves as the special servants of Christ's Mother, while the latter see themselves as his Brides. Their methods may be idiosyncratic, but in their own way they *do* enthusiastically embrace the opposite sex. This is dramatically different from what we see with our resentful gender warriors.

However we go about it, men and women [seem happiest](#) when we are balanced by our sexual complements. Healthy things can still be difficult though. Men and women readily misunderstand one another, and the fact that we *do* need one another opens the door to many types of exploitation and abuse. Avoiding these pitfalls takes work. Too often nowadays, I hear young people describing family life as a hazard more than a blessing, wondering not "what can I do to be worthy of another's love and commitment?" but rather "what can marriage really do for *me*?"

Love doesn't easily grow in such a stony soil.

I myself had the good fortune of growing up in the Mormon Church, where teenagers are given extensive instruction in preparing themselves for marriage. There are elements of that teaching I would modify a bit, just based on my own marital experience. Two commonsense lessons still stand out in my mind though.

First, you can't possibly be a good spouse unless you're willing to work on *yourself*. Your partner will surely have some irritating qualities, but so do you. Also, sometimes marriage will call for things that are not fully congenial to your comfortable, satisfied, long-developed individual self. This can be a problem in a society that is constantly urging us to self-actualize. But be willing to bend a little instead of always insisting that "this is how I am."

For women, I see this manifested in a stubborn reluctance to do things that remind them too much of domestic stereotypes. They're so worried about being pigeonholed as domestic that they don't consider how much the occasional homemade stew or fresh-baked cookie might do to help the men in their lives feel cared for and at home. Is avoiding Donna Reed associations really more important than making your men feel loved?

On the men's side, I often hear gripes about how "commercial America" has made women unreasonably greedy for compliments and ego-stroking. Let's assume this is true (though personally I'm skeptical because I think women have always craved compliments). How hard is it, really, to say some nice things to the women in your life? To me it often seems that resentful men are so allergic to "sensitivity" (which they associate with distasteful images of modern, metrosexual girly-men) that they can hardly be bothered to be *kind*.

The second point is that living together inevitably involves some putting-up-with and I-can-live-with-that. This is expected, and not a violation of your human rights. If men and women always got along *easily*, we wouldn't be so good for one another.

The #MeToo movement has given us a remarkable illustration of just how ungenerous men and women can be towards one another. Aggrieved women, in their zeal to punish the patriarchy, sometimes act as though *any* unwanted expression of interest is an outrageous insult. To be sure, some overtures are improper and deserving of censure. But men and women will never find happiness together if the latter aren't willing to assume *any* responsibility for attracting and encouraging attention in appropriate ways, or for deflecting it graciously when it is unwanted. If women are unable to distinguish between sexual predation and normal sexual attraction, Cupid will find it exceedingly difficult to find his mark.

On the male side, some men resent women's "invasion" of once-masculine spaces to the point that almost any accommodation feels like a personal affront. The truth is, women *do* [feel more vulnerable](#) than men, in public, at work, or in social gatherings. That's because, in a very real sense, we are. We shouldn't treat all men as likely aggressors, but men *should* be expected to conform to behavioral standards that serve, among other things, to help women feel safe. That's always been a major function of gentlemanly behavior, without which men and women rarely find one another bearable for very long.

In their better moments, both feminists and masculinists raise worthwhile points. At the same time, the *posture* of each may be inimical to the happiness of both. For the sake of our children, but even just for our own sakes, men and women need to remember what we used to like about each other. We used to think human society was worth it. Maybe it still is.

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