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The Unmanning of America

Rita Koganzon

The summer after I finished college, my boyfriend and I packed up his car and drove out to Washington, D.C., one of the handful of destination cities for ambitious young graduates. Each of these cities has its own lunch-money generator for young aspirants—San Francisco has its tech sector, New York has its arts and finance, Boston has its university endowments, Washington has the federal government and its tributaries, and Portland instead eschews money and runs on a barter economy of organic vegetables. Once in D.C., we discovered that most people in our situation opt for what is called a "group house"—a multi-bedroom dwelling with a shared kitchen whose maintenance is under constant dispute, and a revolving cast of roommates selected almost at random from a Craigslist ad. Beware of mistaking the "group house" for the "group home" for troubled youth—the etymological and physical similarities can be confounding.

Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys
By Kay S. Hymowitz
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Already part of one social trend—rootless and restless college graduates in search of "personally fulfilling" careers—we soon found ourselves swept into another. My boyfriend moved into a house shared by three other men, all fresh out of college and variously working for defense contractors or going to graduate school. However, their life's meaning was to be found in neither work nor school, but rather in Xbox. After a long day at work, they came home and played video games. On weekends, they unwound from all that video gaming with video games. At first, one roommate had a girlfriend, whom he would invite over to watch him play video games. Soon, the girlfriend left, but the video games did not. Sometimes at 3 a.m., you could lie in bed and hear the *pew-pew-pew!* of simulated machine-gun fire pierce the silence of sleeping suburbia.

This is the tale of woe now unfolding in the great youth metropolises of the country. Kay S. Hymowitz's new book, *Manning Up,* offers a stupefying array of statistics demonstrating that young women are outperforming their male peers on every measure of achievement—they do better in school, get more degrees, get better jobs, make more

money, buy more homes, and so on. The only thing they don't do is marry the men they've left in their dust. Indeed, they don't really marry anyone—if they want children, they cut out the middleman by ordering his sperm online. The median age of marriage for women in 1960 was 20; now it's 26, and closer to 30 for those with graduate training. The strange thing about this development is that no one seems very upset about any of it—men are either content with their lot or indignantly defensive of it, and women whine faintly about the depletion of the marriageable pool but don't want marriage badly enough to settle for some bottom-dweller or to search among the over-30 crowd.

Manning Up, a witty tour of this new social world, arrives in time to join the recent outpouring of coverage of the rapid economic ascent of women that is permeated with crisis rhetoric; for instance, Hanna Rosin's article on the trend in *The Atlantic* bears the foreboding title "The End of Men." Some on the right have pointed a finger at an overly feminized education establishment, accusing the schools of waging a "war against boys" by rewarding girly cooperative virtues like organization, diligence, rule-following, and teamwork at the expense of things at which boys have traditionally excelled—fighting, clowning around, shirking their work, and disrupting class. With their "high-spirited" natures stifled in the classroom, boys wilt, losing interest in academics and dropping out in large numbers, lowering men's overall life achievement and contributing to the growing prison population. Here we have something that resembles a real social problem, and to counter the poisonous effects of so many hard-working and high-achieving girls, these critics call for a return to single-sex education, which, after all, used to turn out successful men.

This could be a promising argument, but it demonstrates a certain internalization of the mushy feminist values it so strenuously opposes when it neglects to mention a central feature of boys' schools during those halcyon days of male achievement—corporal punishment. The high-spirited male nature must be disciplined by one means or another, and where rewarding cooperation and empathy is unsuccessful, the application of severe, systematic beatings by both adults and older students has been known to do the trick. Happily for those committed to countering the pedagogical assault on boys, this method need not be consigned to the dustbin of history: the U.S. Supreme Court has found corporal punishment in schools to be constitutional, and helpful primers for its implementation may be found in George Orwell's and Roald Dahl's vivid accounts of their education in Britain's elite grammar and public schools.

The left, for its part, considers the idea that successful women are to

blame for men's bad behavior preposterous. Yet its response to these "end of men" statistics is a backhanded endorsement. Perhaps fearing that their patriarchy-fighting muscles will atrophy at home, they have taken their energy abroad to places where the oppression of women does not require a Ph.D. in gender studies to detect. In order to counter repressive practices like child marriage and sex trafficking in developing countries, books like Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's *Half the Sky* (2009) rebrand women as powerful engines of economic growth, attempting also to persuade impoverished states that investments in the health and education of their girls will be multiplied many times over in their GDP.

This is what Hymowitz refers to as "the Girl Project" that started in the 1970s—a concerted effort to "create a new breed" of independent women who would no longer need to "rely on husbands as breadwinners." This was not just an American phenomenon; international development initiatives have pushed in the same direction. UNICEF's 2007 *State of the World's Children* report was devoted to the "double dividend of gender equality," offering a list of reasons that women are more promising drivers of economic growth than men: women are more likely to finish school, save their earnings, make financial sacrifices for their children's health, send their children to school, and so on. The barely veiled presumption is that men the world over beat their wives, neglect their children, and squander their wages.

Most shocking among UNICEF's findings is that, despite pervasive discrimination against women, female-headed households in the poorest countries have, on average, better health and economic outcomes than male-headed, two-parent households. Taken together, these statistics suggest that men are nothing less than a complete waste of national resources; one might even wonder why the development community is devoting itself to such slow-motion efforts as microloans to women when the wholesale isolation or expulsion of men (after their sperm is collected and stored) could lift these countries out of poverty much faster.

Warnings about the war against boys at home and calls for girl power abroad have so far been the dominant ways of spinning the statistics about the new female superiority. To her credit, Hymowitz tries to steer a path between the conspiratorial alarmism of the former and the vindictive triumphalism of the latter. Although she delicately proposes that contemporary young men devote so much effort to video games because they have no familial obligations directing their energies toward more productive pursuits, Hymowitz curtly dissociates herself from conservative pro-family arguments—what she calls "family

values agitprop." Historically, the burdens of breadwinning may have provided purpose and direction to men's lives, but Hymowitz is not some scolding traditionalist here to nag them to take such burdens up again. In a previous book, *Liberation's Children* (2003), she demonstrated a greater willingness to play that part; but in *Manning Up*, history is primarily to blame, having created economic and technological incentives for rational men and women to behave exactly as they presently do—which is to say, badly. Here, she is the cool parent who totally gets why you prefer to slack off—and she even realizes that it's society's fault, not yours.

While admitting that the "manchild" is not wholly to blame for present conditions, she nonetheless derides his descent into his "mancave" where he guzzles beer and ogles issues of *Maxim*, or browses Pick-Up Artist message boards in search of ways to improve his "Game." Women are treated more gently since it's hard to blame them for being too excellent, so Hymowitz instead chides them for their frivolity—their obsession with shopping, grooming, and little pink drinks. But Hymowitz's effort to play to the middle—to reject the right's call for self-denial and submission to the constraints of family life, and the left's celebration of women (and men) for, in Sandra Tsing-Loh's memorable phrase, "choosing their choice"—leaves her with little to do beyond gesturing emphatically at these trends.

Perhaps it ought to give us pause that gesturing at social statistics should be sufficient to establish a new trend worthy of an entire book. Hymowitz's work is a direct descendent of a style of public social science inaugurated by neoconservatives in the 1960s. Indeed, Hymowitz's previous book, *Marriage and Caste in America* (2006), revisited the question of black families opened by the famous Moynihan Report of 1965. Then-recent advances in statistical methodology allowed public-policy initiatives to be subjected to empirical scrutiny on a large scale for the first time, and neoconservatives harnessed the power of these statistical insights to level a powerful challenge against the prevailing liberalism: Great Society programs are not only politically objectionable, they also don't work.

This approach was led by political arguments to which statistics were subordinate. When social statistics confirmed that employment for black men was disappearing, and with it, black fatherhood, rather than take this as evidence of a new lifestyle trend, Moynihan saw it as the bellwether of socioeconomic disaster for blacks, and urged policies to strengthen the black family. But arguments are divisive (Moynihan's being a case in point), while statistics speak the language of incontrovertible fact. They tell us what is

really happening even if we can't see it, because real social change is an imperceptible aggregation in subterranean caverns that only regression analysis can illuminate. Up here on the surface, it all looks like individuals, and we're each limited to our anecdotes. So it's not difficult to see how statistics—the mere detection of changes—could come to replace politics as the beginning and end of public social science.

Previous commentators who wrote about the rise of women at least proffered some comprehensive argument in which to embed their statistics. Hymowitz does not: she largely avoids trying to explain why the trend is happening or what to do about it. She does, however, argue that this change represents progress. Whatever the shortcomings of the "New Girl Order," they can't be worse than the privations of the past.

That is not to say that Hymowitz buys into the feminist history of the last century: she insists that shifts in ideas and attitudes about women's roles were only a lagging indicator in women's twentieth-century economic rise. It was industrialization that created a demand for a labor force of educated secretarial and financial workers capable of managing production. Even as domestic industrial production waned, the United States remained the center of a global information economy, and women were well-suited to its specialized, credentials-heavy jobs, but were held back by two significant obstacles—susceptibility to pregnancy and the crushing demands of household labor—which could only be overcome by the introduction of reliable birth control and household technologies.

In her effort to dissociate herself from anything so reactionary-sounding as the view that the past had its virtues, Hymowitz contends that, for women at least, no decent life is possible *without* these technologies: "the arrival of increasingly dependable birth control…began to release women from the fatalism that has been a default mental position for human beings throughout history. Women could plan their lives rather than giving themselves up to an 'It's God's will' or 'Nothin' I can do about it' mentality that suppresses human flourishing." Hymowitz implies that, prior to the mass-marketed birth control introduced in the late nineteenth century, women were precluded from human flourishing. Nor was the terrible reign of female fatalism finally ended until the arrival of time-saving home appliances granted women the freedom to leave household labor behind for self-realization through wage labor. That is to say, more or less, that a good or happy life was inconceivable for women before about 1958.

Notwithstanding the implausibility of this proposition, her wholesale rejection of even the quite recent

past undermines Hymowitz's ability to identify any real problem with the "New Girl Order." Anecdotes about the travails of urban twenty-somethings are amusing but hardly damning when the social changes to which her statistics point—the delay and decline of marriage, the decreased rate of childbearing among young adults—are only shifts relative to the dark ages before washing machines. If those times were bad, then perhaps their associated social conventions—early marriage, childrearing, sleeping through the night rather than video gaming—were equally misguided. Why shouldn't the New Girl Order, which has gone hand-in-hand with our awakening, be just as laudable as washing machines?

But Hymowitz isn't quite willing to concede that. After her effort to avoid partisan arguments hems her in from all sides, Hymowitz settles on the position that the crisis in all of this—a crisis for which neither women nor men, neither ideas nor deliberate choices are responsible, and which can't be resolved by looking to nature or history or morality—is the demise of "life scripts." The traditional life script that once made personal decision-making less fraught and ambiguous, Hymowitz claims, included childhood, adolescence, marriage, childrearing, and death. But that trajectory has broken down and the present generations of "preadults"—particularly men—"don't know what is supposed to come next."

But life scripts are, like statistics, only a descriptive mechanism employed by social scientists to classify things unsusceptible to our agency—in this case, societies long ago or far away. For the members of these societies, no actual choice is made by reference to such a script. Indeed, the life stages it describes are rarely perceived as choices at all, and once they become amenable to choice, a new script containing different necessities has already superseded the old one. We don't consciously write new scripts and demand that others play their parts in them. Scripts of all kinds—life scripts, gender scripts, even dating scripts—only work as long as we don't perceive that we are part of mere theater; for as soon as we feel constrained to play a role, we stomp offstage.

Manning Up ends with a call to child-men: "they'll need to man up." But without any compelling reason or any models to emulate, Hymowitz admits that they're unlikely to listen. "The materials available to young men are meager, and what is available often contradicts itself." In spite of her efforts to distance herself from conservative moralism in order to give us just the facts, Hymowitz finds consolation in that peculiar branch of statistics that samples self-reported intentions. Most Americans, including the video-gaming denizens of Washington group houses and

their bros across the country, still profess—to pollsters at least—a desire to eventually marry and have children. That they do not seem to be moving very quickly towards those goals might be worrisome, or it might not be. If the past is discredited and the present too contentious to judge, we can still put our faith in statistics, and hope that the pollsters turn out to be prophets.

Rita Koganzon *is a graduate student at Harvard.*