

# The progressive conscience

bright blue

THE THINKERS

## Men – a wasting resource

*The feminist drive for equality in the workplace is not what many women want.*

By Professor Geoff Dench

Even more than most other Western societies, Britain has come to adopt a conflict model of relations between men and women - conceptualising them as groups with similar interests and aims competing for domination. This is a pity.

the potential value of sex differences, and giving men specific responsibilities in families for those tasks which women themselves have been least keen or able to carry out. It is much more about Durkheim, and the Division of Labour, than Marx and competition.

I think that such a model turns its back on thousands of years of female experience of how to transform men into tolerably useful members of society. If we neglect this hard won experience, we are spurning a major natural resource.

None of these systems have been without problems. Insofar as men take charge of particular activities, women may feel excluded. And if the family role of men includes representing families, then male values can come to occupy too influential a place. But, until recently, sexual balance and harmony appear to have prevailed. And I think that the fundamental rule underpinning this has been that the 'private realm' of family life and values, controlled by women, has been sovereign. Men and their 'public' realms have been answerable to the private.

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The basic mistake of this model lies in regarding men as occupying the centre of society and monopolising the best positions. This is very hard to believe. Throughout creation, it is females who are central among those species with complex social organisations, because reproduction is the key collective activity around which society revolves. Adult males tend to hover on the edge of groups, available to take part in insemination, and constantly jockeying for position to do this, but not doing much else. What has been distinctive about the evolution of human society is that ways have been found for systematically bringing almost all these males into constructive group membership. This has been achieved by recognising

But this compact is now unravelling in the West. The emergence of modern states has made the public realm ever more fascinating. Also, improvement of birth control technologies has freed up women to expand their own activities. So adjustments to the sexual division of labour were necessary. Unfortunately, advocates of sexual symmetry, who deny difference, have had the upper

# A woman's world

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hand in this process. The resulting social policies adopted to help women, which prioritise work rather than family life, appear to be allowing men to revert to nature.

Those middle class men who are keenest to compete in the job market, because they have access to rewarding careers, seem increasingly to balk at the idea of being parents. Many other men just seem to be drifting into worklessness, as they feel they have little to offer families. For those men whose only possible work is menial or boring, family incentives are crucial.

A common response among them to the notion of feminisation of work, or the idea that women would prefer to do it for themselves, is just to stand back and let them get on with it.

This I think underlies the rising tide of male disorganised behaviour - of apathy, crime, drugs, even suicide. Men know they are more dispensable than women - hence chivalry and men's time-honoured role in risky occupations and war; but hence too their drift back to the margins and shadows when they no longer feel needed.

This is not really a problem for men - who are less of an entity than sometimes imagined. It does however mean

that men have become a problem for society, and blight the lives of communities where a few generations ago they would have been valued and made useful. The ballooning prison population, the large number of unskilled jobless, the high rate of male suicide - now five times as high as among women - all reduce the pool of young men suitable to be selected as husbands, and help to drive Broken Britain.

But not all is yet lost. My recent research suggests that this collapse of male morale is not actually what women want. Most ordinary women, those outside the political class, do not want to dispense with men. They want partners to live with and help bring up their children. They also want husbands who will be reliable breadwinners - giving them more time to be mothers and active in the community.

For modern women, especially those under 35, the private realm is still central; and male providers still have a place. There is no longer much appetite for competing with men as equals in the job market. Sexual interdependence is becoming valued again. The main obstacle to this, making it harder for boys to be aware of the actual situation, is our public commitment to gender symmetry. There are many activities that most women are content to leave

mainly for men - those dealing with things (obdurate matter) rather than people; those involving high risk and anxiety, or relentless (and narrow) concentration. Also most women are happiest working part time and combining it with family life.

If only the Women and Work Commission could stop complaining about male monopolies, there would be plenty of work that British boys could be encouraged to see as waiting for them and needing them, including any number of 'menial' jobs (which women don't much like and so for which, under feminisation, we have become overly dependent on immigrants - most of whom are still propelled by a strong sense of family responsibility).

Over the last few decades what we have seen amounts to a redrawing rather than disappearance of the sexual division of labour.

Women have taken on many roles they did not play before. But there is still much that most prefer men mainly to do. Male labour is still necessary. If the state left this issue more to people's choices, and worried less about women's 'failure' to achieve formal parity, we would make better use of available human resources. ⑩