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A Better World, Run by Women

Male biology has brought the world war, corruption and scandal. Women are poised to lead us to a better place



Research has found that women are superior to men in most ways that will count in the future. *PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES*

By **MELVIN KONNER**

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Hillary Clinton seems to be preparing to run for president, and the former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina may yet enter the race on the Republican side. Whoever wins the White House in 2016, today it seems easily possible that within the next decade, the U.S. will follow Britain, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, India, Israel, Thailand, Norway and dozens of other countries in electing a woman to our most powerful office.

Can we predict the consequences? Yes, we can—and the news is good.

Research has found that women are superior to men in most ways that will count in the future, and it isn't just a matter of culture or upbringing—although both play their roles. It is also biology and the aspects of thought and feeling shaped by biology. It is because of chromosomes, genes, hormones and brain circuits.

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And no, by this I don't mean what was meant by patronizing men who proclaimed the superiority of women in the benighted past—that women are lofty, spiritual creatures who must be left out of the bustle and fray of competitive life, business, politics and war, so that they can instill character in the next generation. I mean something like the opposite of that.

All wars are boyish. People point to Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi and Golda Meir as evidence that women, too, can be warlike. But these women were perched atop all-male hierarchies confronting other hypermasculine political pyramids, and they were masculinized as they fought their way to the top.

There is every reason to think that a future national hierarchy staffed and led by women who no longer have to imitate men, dealing with other nations similarly transformed, would be less likely to go to war. But that's not all. Sex scandals, financial corruption and violence are all overwhelmingly male.

We must give up the illusion of sameness between the sexes. The mammalian body plan is basically female. The reason males exist is that a gene on the Y chromosome derails the basic genetic plan. It causes testes to form, and they produce testosterone while

suppressing female development.

Testosterone goes to the brain in late prenatal life and prepares the hypothalamus and amygdala for a lifetime of physical aggression and a kind of sexual drive that is detached from affection and throws caution to the winds. (I know, not all men, but way too many.) By contrast, almost all women, protected from that hormonal assault, have brains that take care of business without this kind of distracting and destructive delirium.

Our own species hasn't always suffered from male supremacy. Among our hunter-gatherer ancestors, living in small, mobile communities, group decisions were made face to face, among men and women who knew each other intimately. Men tried to dominate, but it wasn't easy. They could show off by hunting, but war, that universal booster of male status, wasn't common.

This changed when hunter-gatherers settled in larger, denser populations. Such cultures could have nobles, commoners and slaves, and they made war often. Men became more aloof from families, and women increasingly became the objects of male strife. Politics became a male game, played in public spaces where men could shame and exclude women, and these tendencies grew more powerful with the rise of farming and chiefdoms and empires.

The Bible, the Iliad, the great Indian epics—all of them are full of sex and violence. I don't know whether Helen's face was what launched a thousand Greek ships against Troy. I don't know whether David really fell in love with Bathsheba and had her soldier-husband sent to die at the front, or if Solomon had seven hundred wives. But all the evidence suggests the plausibility of such stories, and this culture of male domination didn't come to an end with the ancients. It prevailed throughout the middle ages and the Renaissance as well.

But then what happened? Why did some men begin at last to let go of their privileges?

The great transformation of the past two centuries—the slow but relentless decline of male supremacy—can be attributed in part to the rise of Enlightenment ideas generally. The liberation of women has advanced alongside the gradual emancipation of serfs, slaves, working people and minorities of every sort.

But the most important factor has been technology, which has made men's physical strength and martial prowess increasingly obsolete. Male muscle has been replaced to a large extent by machines and robots. Today, women operate fighter jets and attack helicopters, deploying more lethal force than any Roman gladiator or Shogun warrior could dream of.

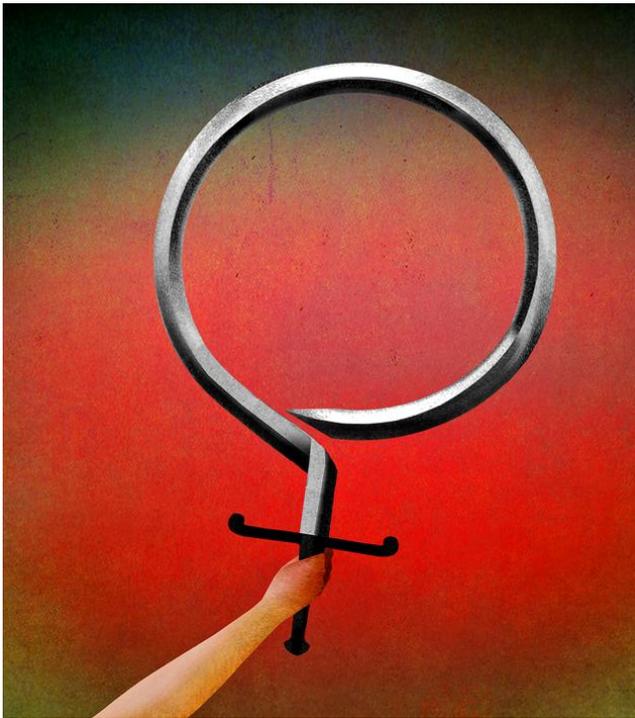


ILLUSTRATION: BRIAN STAUFFER

As women come to hold more power and public authority, will they become just like men? I don't think so. Show me a male brain, and I will show you a bulging amygdala—the brain's center of fear and violence—

densely dotted with testosterone receptors. Women lack the biological tripwires that lead men to react to small threats with exaggerated violence and to sexual temptation with recklessness.

Growing evidence shows that women leaders operate differently. The government shutdown of October 2013 ended, despite a complete congressional impasse, when three women Republican Senators broke ranks from their party. Two women Democrats followed their lead, and men on both sides came along. The bipartisan committee that worked on the final deal was gender balanced, but John McCain perceptively joked that the women were taking over.

Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, who had started it all by courageously calling for compromise, told a reporter, “I don't think it's a coincidence.... Although we span the ideological spectrum, we are used to working together.” While male colleagues crossed their arms and sulked, women crossed the aisle with phone calls, email and social media. The men saw a deal they could live with and followed suit.

What about women in executive office? There are not yet enough women heads of state to study them systematically, but there are enough in other governing roles. In a 2006 study, political scientist Lynne Weikart and her colleagues surveyed 120 mayors—65 women and 55 men—in comparable cities of over 30,000. Women mayors were far more likely to alter the budget process and seek broad participation.

Perhaps it is time for us to consider returning to the hunter-gatherer rules that prevailed for 90% of human history: women and men working at their jobs, sharing, talking, listening and tending children. Men didn't strongly dominate because they couldn't; women's voices were always there, speaking truth to male power every night around the fire. There was violence, and it was mainly male, but it was mostly random, accident more than ideology.

Women won't make a perfect world, but it will be less flawed than the one that men have made and ruled these thousands of years. My grandson, I think, will be happy in the new world. It will be better for him because women will contribute so much more to running it.

— Dr. Konner is a professor in the department of anthropology and the program in neuroscience and behavioral biology at Emory University. This essay is adapted from his new book, "Women After All: Sex, Evolution and the End of Male Supremacy."

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