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BOOKSHELF

Matriarchy on the March

Humans who carry a Y chromosome are more likely to break the law, more likely to die in accidents, more likely to commit acts of violence. Who needs them?

Distaff Sergeant



Army recruits at Fort Rucker, Ala., 1990 PHOTO: CORBIS IMAGES

By DAVID BARASH

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Here is a stunning fact: There is a single chunk of DNA, known as SRY, that dooms its carriers to shorter life spans and a greater probability of death due to accidents, as well as increased risk of being not only violent but also a victim of violence. More than 90% of people who run afoul of the law and are currently incarcerated carry this gene—

although, to be fair, nearly one-half of non-felons are similarly afflicted. It's a tough road for those unfortunates who are forced, through no fault of their own, to deal with such defective genetics: There is no cure. The SRY gene is located on the Y chromosome, and if you haven't already guessed, it's the one that makes its carrier male. SRY comes from "Sex determining Region of the Y chromosome."

These stark biological facts underlie the startling arguments of Melvin Konner's "Women After All." He has written many other books, most recently, "The Evolution of Childhood" (2010), a magisterial tome that dealt extensively and effectively with human infancy, childhood and adolescence from a cross-species, cross-cultural perspective. In "Women After All," Dr. Konner, a professor of anthropology at Emory University, makes a powerful case for a provocative thesis: that women are, in nearly every way that really matters, superior to men and, moreover, that this superiority is finally becoming evident in our societies. In making this argument, he ranges from evolutionary biology through ethology, neurobiology, embryology, anthropology and history, with digressions into economics and politics.

WOMEN AFTER ALL

By Melvin Konner

Norton, 404 pages, \$26.95

Not many people could pull this off—but Dr. Konner does. "In addition to women's superiority in judgment," he writes, "their trustworthiness, reliability, fairness, working and playing well with others, relative freedom from distracting sexual impulses, and lower levels of prejudice, bigotry, and violence make them biologically

superior. They live longer, have lower mortality at all ages, are more resistant to most categories of disease, and are much less likely to suffer brain disorders that lead to disruptive and even destructive behavior. And, of course, most fundamentally they are capable of producing new life from their own bodies, a stressful and costly burden in biological terms, to which men literally add only the tiniest biological contribution—and one that in the not-too-distant future could probably be done without."

Let's face it: Men are responsible for much more than their share of the world's wars, drug abuse and sexual misbehavior. To be sure, men have also been responsible for many of the good—even great—aspects of civilization, but this may be because they grant themselves more influence and opportunity in this regard. "Life on this planet isn't threatened by women's tears; nor does that brimming salty fluid cause poverty, drain public coffers, ruin reputations, impose forced intimacies, slay children, torture

helpless people, or reduce cities to rubble. These disasters are literally man-made." Indeed, if we were to magically do away with male-initiated violence, we would pretty much do away with violence altogether. (Of 80 mass killings in the U.S. involving guns between 1984 and 2014, men perpetrated 78.)

There are books about feminism and women's rights and about the evolutionary biology of sex in animals and people, but none until now that combine the two. "Contrary to all received wisdom," we learn, "women are more logical and less emotional than men. Women do cry more easily, and that, too, is partly biological, although certain male politicians and other prominent men seem able to deploy tears strategically in public." "Women After All" is reminiscent of Ashley Montagu's last and best book, "The Natural Superiority of Women" (1953). Dr. Konner is an anthropologist, as Montagu was; he has done important field work on the !Kung people of southern Africa. In addition, he is a medical doctor who—if anything—writes even better than Montagu, and whereas Montagu took an extreme "nurture" position in the hoary nature/nurture debate, Dr. Konner settles down comfortably on the "nature" side.



Many of the arguments in "Women After All" are grounded in evolutionary theory. For instance, human males produce sperm in huge numbers with little investment in each, whereas females make eggs in much smaller numbers and with immense metabolic and behavioral follow-through. Combine this with the asymmetry in confidence of genetic relatedness ("Mommy's babies, Daddy's maybes") and one can see male mating as a zero-sum game, whereas female reproductive success is substantially less limited by that of one's "sisters." Men—like males of most mammals—are thus more sexually competitive, as well as violence-prone. Women—like females of all mammals—are more nurturant. These widely confirmed biological facts have bothered many feminists, in part because the latter in particular has sometimes been used as a stick with which to beat women, arguing that nurturance is all they are good at—but the reality is that nurturance is a marvelous, wholly admirable trait, and one in terribly short supply.

The author's descriptions of the natural world are erudite and enthusiastic. Here, for

example, is his account of one of the most iconic animal courtship displays: "A peacock struts his stuff slowly, arcing great turquoise plumes that dwarf his glistening blue body, raising a patch of iridescent gold coins, then sweeping a delicate green mesh up into a lustrous fan dotted by gorgeous, staring green-and-gold eyes, in which the bird stands onstage alone, radiating a gaudy spray with feathers like the sun's rays, only in color. Another turn or two later, he enfolds himself in drapery, collapsing his sumptuous feathers down into a sleek, pied multicolored tail that seems to loll along behind him endlessly." By this point, we've already been treated to some extraordinary sexual shenanigans, including penis fencing—no misprint—in flatworms, love-darting in snails, traumatic insemination in bedbugs and reversed sex roles in jacanas (tropical marsh-dwelling birds in which females are large and aggressive, competing with each other to mate with small, devotedly parental males).

But the crux of Dr. Konner's narrative concerns human beings, including those increasingly unnecessary and troublesome individuals suffering from X chromosome deficiency disorder. Male misbehavior, he writes, especially "the behavior of men at the top, or on their way to the top, has been if anything even more oppressive to other men than to women. Men are hugely overrepresented in positions of power, but even more men suffer from those men's behavior." In "Women After All," the author argues that modern hunter-gatherer societies —presumably reflecting our ancestral state—are notably egalitarian. Then, with the shift to agriculture, "what we call civilization literally arose from the mire of flooded fertile soil spattered with the blood of conquered peoples. Men killed men and seized women or enslaved both. Wealthy hereditary aristocracies had standing armies and allied with priestly classes. All were coalitions—conspiracies—of men."

In today's world, Dr. Konner decries the horrors currently inflicted on women worldwide, including—but not limited to—female genital cutting as well as outright rape and murder. A notable omission is the extent to which religious fundamentalisms are especially oppressive of women. This has been true of Christianity, Islam and Judaism in certain times and places; given the prominence of female gods in that vast pantheon labelled Hinduism, one might hope for some departure from this dreary monotheistic pattern. Yet the Indian history of suttee and of child brides augurs otherwise. Genuine women's liberation, it seems, would require human liberation from rigid fundamentalisms of any sort, even perhaps from some brands of feminism. You might want to argue with the seeming stridency of Dr. Konner's thesis, but if so, you need to

read his book first.

"Women After All" reflects the author's outrage at the indignities and brutalities to which women are subjected. But he also makes a cogent and passionate case that by improving the status of women, the world will be made better for men, too. In other words, Dr. Konner doesn't literally call for the end of men, although he does indulge in genuinely hilarious fantasizing in that regard. He does, however, predict quite seriously the coming end of male oppression of women, which, intriguingly, involves less male oppression of men, too. Unfortunately, however, he doesn't describe or advise exactly how this blessed change is to take place, leaving the impression that it is part of the inevitable march of 21st century modernism, thus consistent with Steve Pinker's argument in "The Better Angels of our Nature." As for why such changes are highly likely, Dr. Konner emphasizes that in addition to long-overdue recognition of basic decency and fairness, the advent of machinery has made the ancient male advantage in brute physical strength largely irrelevant. One might add that the spread of monogamy has been an equalizing factor.

Dr. Konner regards the future with hope. "As women gain in influence," he writes, "the world will become more democratic, more socially compassionate, more equal, less discriminatory, less sexually casual, and less pornographic." Medical practice, along with veterinary, dental and law, was once an almost exclusively male preserve. No longer. It remains to be seen whether the upcoming generation of woman doctors, dentists, lawyers and veterinarians—not to mention physicists, chemists, mathematicians, computer scientists, politicians and, yes, soldiers, sailors and pilots—will generate a professional cohort that is more competent, compassionate, thoughtful and socially responsible. I'm betting yes.

—Mr. Barash is an evolutionary biologist and professor of psychology at the University of Washington. His most recent book is "Buddhist Biology."

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