



A Woman's World

Fresher salads? No more war? A look at our feminine future.

BY SARA SKLAROFF

WHERE HAVE ALL THE BOYS GONE? COLLEGE admissions officers would sure like to know. Less than three decades ago, men dominated the nation's campuses. Today, they are significantly outnumbered by women, meaning that administrators have to choose between skewed male-female ratios and affirmative action for the Y-chromosome. But colleges are merely the first responders to what could be an

unprecedented societal event. That's right: Women are taking over.

Already, traditionally male occupations from medicine to bartending are heavily populated by women. We have our second female secretary of state, our first female Speaker of the House, and the first viable female presi-

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dential candidate in the nation's history. Young women today grow up with far more career options than even their supposedly liberated mothers did (though these "options" are often not quite what they promise). What were formerly "feminine" weaknesses are even being retooled as strengths: According to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, crying—once taboo on the job—is becoming acceptable in the workplace, as a way to express emotion and promote "healthy debate."

So let's run out the trend lines for a moment, and imagine this future female planet. It will certainly be a nicer place to live—more attractive, friendlier, and much, much cleaner. You'll be able to find a decent public bathroom wherever you go. Delicious, high-quality salads will be sold everywhere—not the wilted, uninspired packages grudgingly offered at corner delis or Starbucks, but fresh, innovative compositions that will make dieting a snap.

This will be a woman's world, and men will have to learn to fit in. Industrial design will be based on an average woman's size, not a man's, so men will have to squeeze themselves into public bus seats and crouch down to reach items on supermarket shelves. Standard portion sizes at restaurants will be smaller; those who wish to eat more (usually men) will have to pay more. Other pricing schemes that currently favor men will be reversed: Dry cleaning and haircuts, for example, will conform to a flat-fee system.

Schoolteachers, most of whom are women, will finally get the higher salaries they deserve for nurturing the next generation, but it will suddenly become apparent that hedge fund managers, almost all of whom are men, don't really need to make millions of dollars a year for moving some numbers around on a computer screen. There will be more police on the streets, so women can walk alone at night without fear. In public, it will be socially unacceptable to spit, litter, scratch oneself, shout, urinate, or wear shorts with loafers.

Yes, it's a lovely picture—but it doesn't say much about the greater mechanisms of society. What really happens when women rule? History offers few clues. The great female rulers we read about in grade school—Cleopatra, say, or Elizabeth I—are too anomalous to offer much insight. Most mainstream scholars don't believe that matriarchies have ever even existed in human civilizations, despite the feminist appeal of the Amazons and other mythologized creatures. (Indeed, there is evidence that lore of an unruly, female-dominated past is used by some

cultures as an object lesson to keep women out of power.) Anthropologists have identified societies that are organized into female-dominated domestic structures, but these are considered "matrifocal" or "matrilineal," mere hiccups in the great march of male dominance.

Those definitions may not tell the whole story, however. By looking only for mirror images of patriarchies that happen to have women on top, says Peggy Reeves Sanday of the University of Pennsylvania, anthropologists may have failed to spot the different forms that female-dominated societies take. Sanday lived on and off with the Minangkabau people for more than 20 years. Known throughout Indonesia for their business savvy, and overrepresented in the country's intellectual and political life, the four million Minangkabau in West Sumatra also happen to call themselves a matriarchy, Sanday writes in *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy* (2002).

As far back as Alexander the Great, according to their legends, the Minangkabau have been a matrilineal people. Land is passed on through the maternal line, and when a man and a woman marry, the husband moves in with his wife's family. Young men are encouraged to leave their villages for a while to travel and experience the outside world while young women stay at home learning how to run the farms. Though devoted Muslims, the Minangkabau simultaneously follow a traditional religion that is resolutely female oriented, focused on maternal ideals of growth and nurturance. In their history, queens are preeminent, Sanday says: "Male aggression plays a subordinate role to the maternal authority of the divine queen." She also reports a "near absence of rape and wife abuse."

Indeed, gender politics look very different in Minangkabau society. "In answer to my persistent questions about 'who rules,'" Sanday says, "I was often told that I was asking the wrong question. Neither sex rules, it was explained to me, because males and females complement one another." Decisions are made by consensus, and the Minangkabau keep one another in line by enforcing their custom of acting for the common good. Each sex has its own, well-defined realm. Men perform starring roles in religion and governance (though clearly within a domain constructed by women), while women are leaders in culture, education, and ceremony—and "hold the keys to the rice house," making the important economic decisions.



Women call the shots among the Mosuo in the Himalayas, but they still have to dig potatoes. Here a young woman contemplates her matriarchal future.

A better-known matrifocal culture can be found among the Mosuo, an agrarian group of about 50,000 who have lived for almost two millennia in a remote corner of China, high in the Himalayas. Their fame derives from the practice of “walking marriage”: A woman does not take a husband, but once she turns 13, she is given her own bedroom (or “flower chamber”) and can invite any man to spend a night with her, so long as he leaves before dawn. In practice, this usually doesn’t result in wild promiscuity; it’s more like serial monogamy, kept strictly private and separate from the daily workings of the family. But walking marriage demolishes the traditional concept of matrimony as a means of protecting a sexually active woman. As one Mosuo woman told a documentary filmmaker, “Why would you want the marriage license to handcuff yourself?”

Although men assume important roles in the community, Mosuo fathers do not live with their children, remaining instead in their own mothers’ homes. Uncles shoulder a large portion of child rearing, and many children don’t even know who their fathers are. There are no jails; instead, a powerful sense of group-enforced propriety maintains

order. Yang Erche Namu, a Mosuo-born singer famous in China, described the code of conduct in her 2003 memoir *Leaving Mother Lake*: “We must not speak ill of others or shout at people or discuss their private affairs. When we disapprove of someone, we must do so in halftones or use euphemisms or, at worst, mockery. . . . We must repress jealousy and envy, and we must always be prepared to ignore our differences for the sake of maintaining harmony.”

Outsiders, of course, are more interested in the sex. The idea that a female-dominated culture could promote sexual freedom flies in the face of most cultures’ assumptions about women’s sexuality. But the animal world offers an even more fascinating example: the bonobo. Along with chimpanzees, bonobos are humans’ closest animal relatives, sharing more than 98 percent of our DNA. Yet they couldn’t be more different from the warlike chimps. Bonobos live in matriarchal tribes, in which conflicts are settled by sex, and lots of it. They have sex to greet one another and to make friends; they use it to resolve conflicts and then they have makeup sex afterward—all in an impressive variety of positions. Partners can be male or female, of literally any

age, and are often taken from within an individual's immediate family as well as outside of it.

Within each tribe, even the lowest-status female is considered superior to the highest-status male. Older bonobo females keep younger females in check by snubbing them: walking away from a grooming attempt or refusing to share food. Grown male bonobos cling to their mothers

class professional women dominate an underclass of working he-men? That's certainly good fodder for science fiction, but it's also a vision predicated on one narrow idea about how a society works. The Minangkabau who chided Sanday perhaps have a message for us, too: "Who's on top?" may no longer be a meaningful question if women rule the world. The real effect of female dom-

ination may be felt less in the boardroom than in our day-to-day existence. While the greater availability of salad greens may not seem like a revolution, it connotes a culture that cares deeply about the well-lived life, and the indi-

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in order to attain status and protection. The kicker: Male bonobos live longer and are generally healthier than male chimps, since they aren't required to fight for status and don't live with the stress that chimps do.

This is not to say that human males would actually be better off in a matriarchy. Women regularly show themselves to be every bit as cruel as men, and sometimes even more savage. Like the bonobo elders rejecting their daughters, human women can wield their considerable emotional intelligence to nasty effect. Teenage girls were known to be trouble well before we started talking about "queen bees" and "mean girls." And we all know plenty of female bosses who hamstring the success of women who work for them.

In fact, there's evidence that women aren't that much less aggressive than men—they're just better at hiding it. Psychologists have found that while men channel their aggression through purported "rationality" (interrupting, criticizing unjustly, questioning others' judgment), women are more likely to use "social manipulation" (gossiping, backbiting, ostracizing) to get what they want. Remember that in both the Mosuo and Minangkabau cultures it is unacceptable to criticize another person directly. But passive aggression is aggression nonetheless.

One thing that's troubling about the widening gender gap in college is what it will mean for relations between the sexes down the road. Will the resulting imbalance between educated women and a shrinking pool of potential mates create a world in which upper-

vidual experiences of those who live it.

Which is not to say that the first generations of female leaders won't concern themselves with power. After all, Margaret Thatcher didn't become Britain's prime minister by seeking consensus and expressing her feelings, and it's not clear that Hillary Clinton would be well-advised to use those techniques either, should she reach the White House. But decades on, when women born into a female-dominated society come of age, hierarchy might be less important than group welfare and consensus. We might have less war and more behind-the-scenes politicking. Or, given that women have never been in charge before, there may be societal structures we can't yet imagine.

Still, we've sort of been here before, if you consider that some proponents of the women's vote argued that, if enfranchised, the more "moral" fairer sex would make the world a better place. Conversely, there were dire predictions about the effects of women's suffrage. In 1853, a *New York Herald* reporter described his state's suffrage convention as "a gathering of unsexed women, . . . all of them publicly propounding the doctrine that they should be allowed to step out of their appropriate sphere to the neglect of those duties which both human and divine law have assigned them." His desperate conclusion: "Is the world to be depopulated?" Well, not so far. But women's suffrage also didn't put an end to war, and it certainly didn't fully achieve equality for the sexes. What it did show is that women are as diverse, as incisive, and, yes, as fallible as men. And that's worth remembering as the scales of leadership tip in the other direction. ■