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What Women Want Now

By Nancy Gibbs

If you were a woman reading this magazine 40 years ago, the odds were good that your husband provided the money to buy it. That you voted the same way he did. That if you got breast cancer, he might be asked to sign the form authorizing a mastectomy. That your son was heading to college but not your daughter. That your boss, if you had a job, could explain that he was paying you less because, after all, you were probably working just for pocket money.

It's funny how things change slowly, until the day we realize they've changed completely. It's expected that by the end of the year, for the first time in history the majority of workers in the U.S. will be women — largely because the downturn has hit men so hard. This is an extraordinary change in a single generation, and it is gathering speed: the growth prospects, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, are in typically female jobs like nursing, retail and customer service. More and more women are the primary breadwinner in their household (almost 40%) or are providing essential income for the family's bottom line. Their buying power has never been greater — and their choices have seldom been harder.

It is in this context that the Rockefeller Foundation, in collaboration with TIME, conducted a landmark survey of gender issues to assess how individual Americans are reacting. Is the battle of the sexes really over, and if so, did anyone win? How do men now view female power? How much resentment or confusion or gratitude is there for the forces that have rearranged family life, rewired the economy and reinvented gender roles? And what, if anything, does everyone agree needs to happen to make all this work? The study found that men and women were in broad agreement about what matters most to them; gone is the notion that women's rise comes at men's expense. As the Old Economy dissolves and pressures on working parents grow, they share their fears about what this means for their children and their frustration with institutions that refuse to admit how much has changed. In the new age, the battles we fight together are the ones that define us.

A Quiet Revolution

In the spring of 1972, TIME devoted a special issue of the magazine to assessing the status of women in the throes of "women's lib." At a time when American society was racing through change like a reckless teenager, feminism had sputtered and stalled. Women's average wages had actually fallen relative to men's; there were fewer women in the top ranks of civil service (under 2%) than there were four years before. No woman had served in the Cabinet since the Eisenhower Administration;

there were no female FBI agents or network-news anchors or Supreme Court Justices. The nation's campuses were busy hosting a social revolt, yet Harvard's tenured faculty of 421 included only six women. Of the Museum of Modern Art's 1,000 one-man shows over the previous 40 years, five were by women. Headhunters lamented that it was easier to put a man on the moon than a woman in a corner office. "There is no movement," complained an activist who resigned her leadership position in the National Organization for Women two years after it was founded. "*Movement* means 'going someplace,' and the movement is not going anywhere. It hasn't accomplished anything." ([Read TIME's 1972 cover story "Where She Is and Where She's Going."](#))

That was cranky exaggeration; many changes were felt more than seen, a shift in hopes and expectations that cracked the foundations of patriarchy. "In terms of real power — economic and political — we are still just beginning," Gloria Steinem admitted. "But the consciousness, the awareness — that will never be the same."

So it's worth stopping to look at what happened while we were busy ending the Cold War and building a multicultural society and enjoying the longest economic expansion in history. In the slow-motion fumbblings of family life, it was easy just to keep going along, mark the milestones, measure the kids on the kitchen door and miss the movement. In 1972 only 7% of students playing high school sports were girls; now the number is six times as high. The female dropout rate has fallen in half. College campuses used to be almost 60-40 male; now the ratio has reversed, and close to half of law and medical degrees go to women, up from fewer than 10% in 1970. Half the Ivy League presidents are women, and two of the three network anchors soon will be; three of the four most recent Secretaries of State have been women. There are more than 145 foundations designed to empower women around the world, in the belief that this is the greatest possible weapon against poverty and disease; there was only one major foundation (the Ms. Foundation) for women in 1972. For the first time, five women have won Nobel Prizes in the same year (for Medicine, Chemistry, Economics and Literature). We just came through an election year in which Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Tina Fey and Katie Couric were lead players, not the supporting cast. And the President of the United States was raised by a single mother and married a lawyer who outranked and outearned him.

It is still true that boardrooms and faculty clubs and legislatures and whole swaths of professions like, say, hedge-fund management remain predominantly male; women are about 10% of civil engineers and a third of physicians and surgeons but 98% of kindergarten teachers and dental assistants, and they still earn 77 cents on the dollar compared with men. They are charged higher premiums for health insurance yet still have greater out-of-pocket expenses for things as basic as contraception and maternity care. At times it seems as if the only women effortlessly balancing their jobs, kids, husbands and homes are the ones on TV.

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Now the recession raises the stakes and shuffles the deck. Poll after poll finds women even more anxious than men about their family's financial security. While most workers have seen their wages stall or drop, women's earnings fell 2% in 2008, twice as much as men's. Women are 32% more likely than men to have subprime mortgages, leaving them more vulnerable in the housing crisis. The Guttmacher Institute found that the downturn has affected the most basic decisions in family life. Nearly half of women surveyed in households earning less than \$75,000 want to delay pregnancy or limit the number of children they have. At the same time, women are poised to emerge from the downturn with even greater relative economic power as the wage gap narrows. A new survey by GfK Roper for NBC Universal gives a whole new meaning to the power of the purse: 65% of women reported being their family's chief financial planner, and 71% called themselves the family accountant. According to a Mediamark Research & Intelligence survey, they make 75% of the buying decisions in American homes. Together, women control more wealth than ever in history.

Progress is seldom simple; it comes with costs and casualties, even challenges about whether a change represents an advance or a retreat. The TIME survey provides evidence of both. At the most basic level, the argument over where women belong is over; the battle of the sexes becomes a costume drama, like *Middlemarch* or *Mad Men*. Large majorities, across ages and incomes and ideologies, view women's growing role in the workforce as good for both the economy and society in general. More than 8 in 10 say mothers are just as productive at work as fathers or childless workers are. Even more, some 84% affirm that husbands and wives negotiate the rules, relationships and responsibilities more than those of earlier generations did; roughly 7 in 10 men say they are more comfortable than their fathers were with women working outside the home, while women say they are less financially dependent on their spouse than their mother was.

This is not to say there's nothing left to argue about. More than two-thirds of women still think men resent powerful women, yet women are more likely than men to say female bosses are harder to work for than male ones. Men are much more likely to say there are no longer any barriers to female advancement, while a majority of women say men still have it better in life. People are evenly split over whether the "mommy wars" between working and nonworking mothers are finally over.

But just as striking is how much men and women agree on issues that divided them a generation ago. "It happened so fast," writes Gail Collins in her new book, *When Everything Changed*, "that the revolution seemed to be over before either side could really find its way to the barricades." It's as though sensible people are too busy to bother bickering about who takes out the garbage or who deserves the corner office; many of the deepest conflicts are now ones that men and women share.

Especially in the absence of social supports, flexible work arrangements and affordable child care, it's hardly surprising that a majority of both men and women still say it is best for children to have a father working and a mother at home. Among the most dramatic changes in the past generation is the detachment of marriage and motherhood; more men than women identified marriage as "very important" to their happiness. Women no longer view matrimony as a necessary station on the road to financial security or parenthood. The percentage of children born to single women has leaped from 12% to 39%. Whereas a majority of children in the mid-1970s were raised by a stay-at-home parent, the portion is now less than a third, and nearly two-thirds of people say this has been a negative for American society.

Among the most confounding changes of all is the evidence, tracked by numerous surveys, that as women have gained more freedom, more education and more economic power, they have become less happy. No tidy theory explains the trend, notes University of Pennsylvania economist Justin Wolfers, a co-author of *The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness*. "We looked across all sectors — young vs. old, kids or no kids, married or not married, education, no education, working or not working — and it stayed the same," he says of the data. "But there are a few ways to look at it," he adds. "As Susan Faludi said, the women's movement wasn't about happiness." It may be that women have become more honest about what ails them. Or that they are now free to wrestle with the same pressures and conflicts that once accounted for greater male unhappiness. Or that modern life in a global economy is simply more stressful for everyone but especially for women, who are working longer hours while playing quarterback at home. "Some of the other social changes that have happened over the last 35 years — changes in family, in the workplace — may have affected men differently than women," Wolfers says. "So maybe we're not learning about changes due to the women's movement but changes in society."

All the shapes in the puzzle are shifting. If there is anything like consensus on an issue as basic as how we live our lives as men and women, as lovers, parents, partners, it's that getting the pieces of modern life to fit together is hard enough; something has to bend. Equal numbers of men and women report frequent stress in daily life, and most agree that government and businesses have failed to adjust to the changes in the family. As the Old Economy dissolves before our eyes, men and women express remarkably similar life goals when asked about the importance of money, health, jobs and family. If male jobs keep vanishing, if physical strength loses its workplace value, if the premium shifts ever more to education, in which achievement is increasingly female, then we will soon be having parallel conversations: What needs to be done to free American men to realize their full potential? You can imagine the whole conversation flipping in a single generation.

It's no longer a man's world. Nor is it a woman's nation. It's a cooperative, with bylaws under constant negotiation and expectations that profits be equally shared.

— *With reporting by Andréa Ford and Deirdre van Dyk*

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