

The Last Days of the American Male

An interview with journalist Hanna Rosin: Why she'll argue that "men are finished" at the Sept. 20 *Slate/Intelligence Squared U.S.* debate.

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Hanna Rosin

Hanna Rosin's 2010 *Atlantic* cover story, "The End of Men," was one of the most talked-about magazine articles in recent years. "Man has been the dominant sex since, well, the dawn of mankind," wrote Rosin, an award-winning journalist for *Slate* and the *Atlantic*. "But for the first time in human history, that is changing—and with shocking speed."

That shift, she says, hasn't showed signs of slowing in the past year. And that's why she'll debate *for* the motion that "men are finished" during the Sept. 20 live *Slate/Intelligence Squared U.S. debate* at NYU.

Why are men finished, exactly? Rosin says they've failed to adapt to a modern, postindustrial economy that demands a more traditionally—and stereotypically—feminine skill set (read: communication skills, social intelligence, empathy, consensus-building, and flexibility). Statistics show they're rapidly falling behind their female counterparts at school, work, and home. For every two men who receive a college degree, three women will. Of the 15 fastest-growing professions during the next decade, women dominate all but two. Meanwhile, men are even languishing in movies and on television: They're portrayed as deadbeats and morons alongside their sardonic and successful female co-stars.

I caught up with Rosin earlier this week to talk about the downside of female dominance, her own decidedly unfeminist upbringing, and how she plans to win the Sept. 20 debate. Excerpts from the interview are below.

Slate: What question or idea do you think will be at the core of the Sept. 20 debate?

Hanna Rosin: The core of the debate will be deciding whether these trends [of women pulling ahead] are real or not. We see all of these bits and pieces [of "The End of Men" trend] in the economy and in pop culture. But the core will be determining whether it's really true, or whether it's just a momentary fad. All these TV sitcoms that decided men are emasculated and men are finished: Are they just a fad of the moment, or do they reveal something real? I think it's hard for people to wrap their minds around the fact that it might be something real.

Slate: Is that something you experienced in the months after "The End of Men" came out—people having a hard time wrapping their mind around the concept?

Rosin: Not really so much, actually. The two kinds of responses I experienced were an annoyed feminist response, which was, 'this is an argument that comes up historically over and over again as a distraction from the real problems that are facing women.' And then on the other side [there's a response] from men who find it insulting. Like, "Don't you care about your sons? Don't you care about your husband?" People think it's an insulting way to frame the argument.

Slate: What are some of the biggest misconceptions you've had to respond to as a result of the "End of Men"? Did people misunderstand what you were trying to say at all?

Rosin: The question I always have to respond to is, '[if women are taking over] why are there so many more men in power?' If you look at Hollywood, or you look at the Fortune 500 list, or you look at politics, there's a disproportionate number of men in the higher positions of power.

Slate: Why is that, then?

Rosin: Men have been at this for 40,000 years. Women have been rising for something like 30 or 40 years. So of course women haven't occupied every single [high-powered] position. How would that be possible? The rise of women is barely a generation old. But if you look at everything else, like the median, the big bulge in the middle, it's just unbelievable what has happened: Women are more than 50 percent of the workforce, and they're more than 50 percent of managers. It's just extraordinary that that's happened in basically one generation. It seems like whatever it is that this economy is demanding, whatever special ingredients, women just have them more than men do.

Slate: Is the dominance of women right now a good thing?

Rosin: The dominance of women is a good and a bad thing. If you take the *non*-college-educated class, for example, the women are really, really struggling. They're holding down the jobs, they're going to school, they're raising the kids. One economist calls that situation "the last one holding the bag" theory. In other words, the reason that women are doing better than men is because the children are with them, and so they have to make ends meet. So they hustle in order to make ends meet, but their lives are really, really hard, and it's terrible for the children. And the fact that about one-fifth of American men are not working—we're almost at Great Depression levels—that's really terrible. And it doesn't seem to be getting any better. So, no, this isn't like, "yay, we won! yay, we triumphed!" It's actually really bad.

Slate: Recently, Pew released some data that revealed how the recovery has been better for men than women.

Rosin: I've seen all of those numbers. It's totally unsurprising. Men were hit so unbelievably hard by this recession, but I think this is historically true in all recessions: You almost always get a bounce-back that favors the manufacturing industry initially. So it's not that surprising. It doesn't mean that overall men are doing better. The overall message of the last 25 to 30 years of the economy is the manufacturing era is coming to an end, and men need to retool themselves, get a different education than the one they've been getting, and they're not doing it.

Slate: That's something you bring up in the piece—this failure of men to adapt. Ideally, of course, we'd have gender equality in all industrial and domestic spheres. But is this even realistic? Will men eventually assimilate to the new economy?

Rosin: I'm not prepared to answer that question. Some people say it's biology and brain makeup that make women do better at this moment. Obviously that's partly true: There's some way in which women are wired to kind of concentrate and focus and do better in school. On the other hand, it may be because they're the underdogs, that they're getting this extra juice somehow. Sometimes I look at this new class of women who are surpassing their husbands and really hustling, like in places like pharmacy school, which is where one of my book chapters is set. And they remind me of new immigrants. They're this class of people who are trying to get somewhere in a real hurry, and the men just seem to be sitting around in no hurry. One of the young guys I interviewed put it to me: "I just feel like my team is losing." They feel like women have clocked them, and it came as a surprise to this young generation of men, so I don't know that they can't catch up. They might.

Slate: You wrote "The End of Men" over a year ago, and now you're working on a book about the subject. If you had to write it again now, are there any sections that you would revise? Any data or information that you've uncovered since that has altered your perspective on the points you've made?

Rosin: I don't think there's anything I would change about the actual piece, the piece is still true. But the issue manifests itself really differently for the college-educated class than for the non-college educated, and I think people mix those up all the time. So I would make that distinction much clearer in the piece, which I do in the book. I would also point out more cultural changes. There are so many ways this phenomenon is showing up in the culture—in TV, movies, in celebrity marriages. If you open your eyes to it, it's absolutely everywhere. I wrote a piece in the *Atlantic* last week about the new TV season in which six different fall sitcoms are about men being surpassed by women.

Slate: Tell me a little bit about your upbringing. What were your family dynamics like growing up?

Rosin: There were definitely no feminists in my house. My family was super working class. But there was a kind of natural female dominance. My mother definitely wears the pants in my family, and I come from generations where the men disappeared, got sick, died, or for whatever

reason, the women wore the pants. My great-grandmother ran away from her husband, my grandmother's husband died very young, and my mother rules the roost in my house. But she would never say she was a feminist, ever. She's fairly conservative. I grew up with the natural sense that female dominance was possible, but not that it's some kind of political message. Female dominance wasn't an ideal, but just a natural occurrence by virtue of my mother's personality and the circumstances of all of the women ahead of her.

Slate: Last thing. Have you ever debated before?

Rosin: Yes, I was a mega-high-school debater.

Slate: Any deadly teenage tactics that you're planning to pull out?

Rosin: Just be really mean [laughs]. I feel like I debate the way I play soccer—there's some nugget of meanness that comes out. I think I'll just be entertaining, and slightly mean.