

GUEST ESSAY

How Our Messed-Up Dating Culture Leads to Loneliness, Anger and Donald Trump

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By Sarah Bernstein

Ms. Bernstein's latest play, "Strange Men," takes place in a dating workshop for straight men and is currently in development with Stroller Scene.

Joe Rogan. Elon Musk. Representatives of bro culture are on the ascent, bringing with them an army of disaffected young men. But where did they come from? Many argue that a generation of men are resentful because they have fallen behind women in work and school. I believe this shift would not have been so destabilizing were it not for the fact that our society still has one glass-slippered foot in the world of Cinderella.

Hundreds of years after the Brothers Grimm published their version of that classic rags-to-riches story, our cultural narratives still reflect the idea that a woman's status can be elevated by marrying a more successful man — and a man's diminished by pairing with a more successful woman. Now that women are pulling ahead, the fairy tale has become increasingly unattainable. This development is causing both men and women to backslide to old gender stereotypes and creating a hostile division between them that provides fuel for the exploding manosphere. With so much turmoil in our collective love lives, it's little wonder Americans are experiencing surging loneliness, declining birthrates and — as evidenced by Donald Trump's popularity with young men — a cascade of resentment that threatens to reshape our democracy.

When we think of Prince Charming, most of us probably picture a Disney figure with golden epaulets and great hair. In the Brothers Grimm version of "Cinderella," he is called simply "the prince," and neither his looks nor his personality receive even a passing mention. In fact, we learn nothing about him except for the only thing that matters: He has the resources to give Cinderella a far better life than the one she is currently living. Throughout much of Western literature, this alone qualified as a happy ending, given that a woman's security and sometimes her survival were dependent on marrying a man who could materially support her.

Recently, men's and women's fortunes have been trending in opposite directions. Women's college enrollment first eclipsed men's around 1980, but in the past two decades or so this gap has become a chasm. In 2022, men made up only 42 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds at four-year schools, and their graduation rates were lower than women's as well. Since 2019, there have been more college-educated women in the work force than men.

Cinderella may now have her own castle — single women are also exceeding single men in rates of homeownership — but she is unlikely to be scouring the village for a hot housekeeper with a certain shoe size. A 2016 study in *The Journal of Marriage and Family* suggests that even when economic pressure to marry up is lower, cultural pressure to do so goes nowhere. A recent paper from economists at the St. Louis Federal Reserve found that since the 1960s, when women's educational attainment and work force participation first began to surge, Americans' preference for marrying someone of equal or greater education and income has grown significantly.

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Our modern fairy tales — romantic comedies — reflect this reality, promoting the fantasy that every woman should have a fulfilling, lucrative career ... and also a husband who is doing just a little better than she is. In 2017, a Medium article analyzed 32 rom-coms from the 1990s and 2000s and discovered that while all starred smart, ambitious women, only four featured a woman with a higher-status job than her male love interest.

Straight men may not be taking their cues from old Sandra Bullock movies, but their preferred relationships also mirror the rom-com ideal. A 2019 study by the economist Joanna Syrda found that husbands were happiest when their wives contributed 40 percent of the family's income. Any percentage above this threshold, however, increased their anxiety.

In 2014, I had a brief stint working for a men's dating coach, an experience that would eventually inspire me to write a play. At the time, it seemed like certain gender norms in romance might be changing. For the clients who sought out this coach, a central concern was how to act like a "real man" without offending modern women. Should they make the first move? Should they pay for a date? Ten years and multiple feminist movements later, members of Gen Z still expect men to pick up the check.

The male breadwinner norm has become a kind of cultural anchor that keeps us going around in circles, returning again and again to the gender dynamics we have tried to leave behind.

Case in point: Women's growing success, coupled with the belief that a male partner must always be more successful, gives the shrinking pool of more successful men tremendous power. In 2017, researchers at the University of Utah found that in unbalanced populations, "the more common sex must cater to the preferences of the rarer sex in order to acquire a mate." This could explain why today social media is rife with male fantasies, from beautiful, submissive "tradwives" to the hyper-feminine sorority pledges of "Bama Rush." It could also explain why, alongside popular hashtags like #marryup and #richmen, another trending topic for women is celibacy.

And while a small group of #richmen may be reaping the benefits, many others find themselves shut out. According to Richard Reeves, whose book "Of Boys and Men" explores the reasons behind the growing gender achievement gap, heterosexual men who fall behind their female peers often experience a hit to both their romantic prospects and their sense of identity, leaving them searching for ways to affirm their manhood.

Enter the manosphere: a space occupied by new media podcasters and their favored politicians who win eyeballs, votes and dollars by selling a retrograde version of masculinity as the fix for men's woes. In the final month of his presidential campaign, Mr. Trump skipped traditional outlets for a manosphere media blitz, which many credit for his 14-point lead among young men. While so-called female gold diggers are an obsession of the manosphere, much of its content reinforces the male-breadwinner norm — tying money to manliness and women's preference for providers to biology.

Romantic pessimism pervades the manosphere, which puts forth that dating is doomed, and modern women are not to be trusted. Modern women feel similarly despondent. The Cut ran an article this summer asking straight women: "Is Dating a Total Nightmare for You Right Now?" It received so many furious, affirmative responses, the site published a digest of the most representative and depressing comments soon after.

All this is contributing to a larger "epidemic of loneliness," to use the words of Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, who believes this problem is wreaking havoc on both our emotional and physical health. Last year, 41 percent of single people had no interest in dating at all, as reported by The Survey Center on American Life, an alarming statistic for those worried about U.S. marriage rates and birthrates, which are already at or near historic lows.

The manosphere would have us believe that this situation was inevitable, that women have emasculated men with their success and now complain that there aren't enough real men to go around. In truth, our culture is broken because while we have acknowledged the limiting nature of the peasant-to-princess story line, we have not done the same for the prince. Over the past 60 years, as girls and women have fought their way into classrooms and boardrooms, society has expanded its idea of womanhood accordingly, yet our definition of manhood has failed to evolve alongside it.

Letting go of the male breadwinner norm is not an instant fix for our culture, but we can't move forward without that step. After all, "breadwinner" is not only a limiting identity; it's also a relative one. If we don't release men from the expectation, any plan to help them regain lost ground will have to also ensure that women never catch up.

This zero-sum paradigm has always been a feature of Trumpism, which is all about keeping resources with the right kind of people. But if we are willing to reject the manosphere's narrow ideas of masculinity, we will find that it is possible for both men and women to thrive at the same time — in work and in love. This future is ours to create. Don't let anyone tell you it's a fairy tale.

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