

July 13, 2009

## The He-cession's Raw Deal

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Behind Washington's feverish debate over the \$787 billion stimulus package is a question of why one gender is getting left behind--and it's not women.

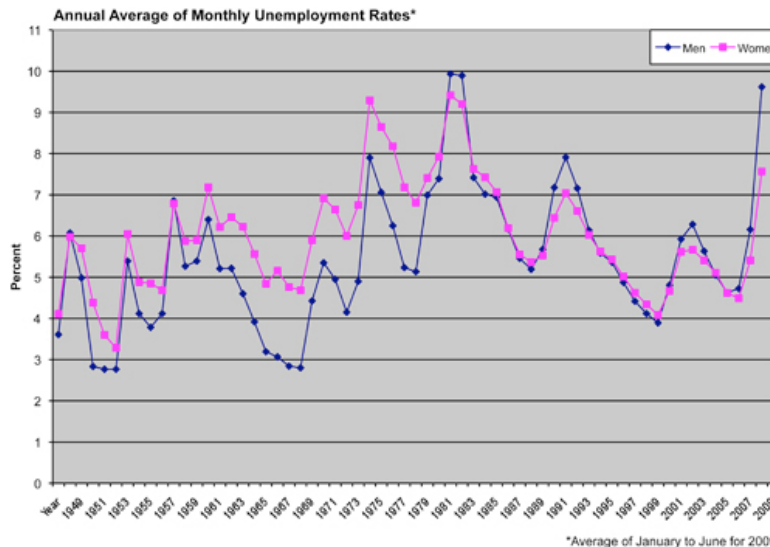
No modern economic crisis has more disproportionately impacted men than today's Great Recession. Despite women constituting no more than a quarter of job losses, they are expected to receive more than 40 percent of the stimulus spending--and possibly significantly more.

Men have long felt the brunt of hard times. Every recession since at least 1964 has impacted men most. By 1982, men's annual average unemployment rate surpassed women's for the first time, according to Bureau of Labor data. But if all recessions are harder on men, this recession is especially hard.

Men amount to a slim majority of the workforce but about 75 percent of all job losses, since the recession began in December 2007. Before the recession, there was no significant gender gap in the unemployment rate. Since then, men's unemployment rate has more than doubled.

In the worst years of the 1990s and 1980s recessions, as well as this decade's earlier downturn, men's unemployment rate was never more than about a point above women's. Today, for workers 16 and over, 10.6 percent of men and 8.3 percent of women are unemployed. That means 2.8 million more men than women are without work. And with this reality has come a new word: he-cession.

One would not know it from Washington's remedy. Capitol Hill is already rife with debate over the snail's pace of the stimulus spending. Only one in four dollars have been spent or obligated thus far. But there is another issue afoot. Men are not seeing their share of tax-dollars.



### Pocketbooks over Wallets

There is an understanding in Beltway politics: show me your budget and I'll show you your values.

Today's recession is so severe, in part, because it has accelerated the deindustrialization of America. The stimulus package was to turn the tide. We were to have a new New Deal. Those who lost the most work would find work in "shovel ready" projects. Simultaneously, bridges, roads and rails were to be renovated.



**David Paul Kuhn**  
Author Archive

Empty comment input fields.

Early on, the Obama administration estimated that more than four in ten stimulus jobs were going to women despite the fact that, by its calculation, women constituted only two in ten job losses. It was a stimulus that would not proportionally stimulate the most depressed sectors. For millions of men, this New Deal was turning out to be a raw deal.

By early June, the Associated Press reported that while "the public face of the stimulus package has been the worker in a hard hat ... most of the roughly \$300 billion going directly to the states is being funneled through existing government programs for healthcare, education, unemployment benefits, food stamps, and other social services."

Women make up 75 to 80 percent of teachers and social workers. Three-fourths of health care jobs belong to women. Meanwhile, men comprise 97 percent of all construction jobs and about seven in ten manufacturing jobs.

Health care employment actually increased by 21,000 in June. By comparison, as of July 1, about half of the 6.5 million jobs lost in the recession were in the male worlds of manufacturing and construction. One-third of all employment in motor vehicles and parts alone, some 335,000 jobs, have been terminated.

The female-slanted stimulus is owed in part to the weight of the women's lobby. As Christina Hoff Sommers **detailed** in the Weekly Standard, women's groups successfully lobbied for redirecting the spending away from men. It was Christina Romer, head of the Council of Economic Advisers, who recalled that, "The very first email I got ... was from a women's group saying 'We don't want this stimulus package to just create jobs for burly men.'"

Compared to women, men have no organized influential advocacy group. That is largely men's fault. Men generally don't see their lives in gendered terms, in part due to their historical dominance. But despite that dominance waning, no significant and sustained "men's movement" has emerged.

Men are often the last to acknowledge their own struggle. Faced with adversity, a man must "man up." "Grin and bear it." Our culture is replete with idioms telling men to "tough it out." Victimizing is antithetical to most men's core understanding of manhood.

### **"Could Testosterone be to Blame?"**

Our culture, and particularly men, may be reluctant to discuss men as victims. They are however not unaccustomed to blame.

Some respected media outlets have been quick to blame manhood for the bad guys who brought us to the brink. We are told an innately, and flawed, male quality has led us astray. This recession purportedly signifies more than economic decline, but the decline of American masculinity itself.

In February, ABC's "Good Morning America," headlined a segment: "Should women be in charge? Would things have been different now?" It went on to ask, "Could testosterone be to blame?"

In June, Foreign Policy magazine ran a set of articles headlined "**The Death of Macho**" and "**Why Macho had to Go.**" The second essay termed this recession "the meltdown of the hypermasculine, risk-seeking model of finance capitalism."

It was however the lead story by Reihan Salam that argued the United States was witnessing a "mortal blow to the macho men's club called finance capitalism... The 'penis competition' made possible by limitless leverage, arcane financial instruments, and pure unadulterated capitalism will now be domesticated in lasting ways. ...We have no precedent for a world after the death of macho. But we can expect the transition to be wrenching, uneven, and possibly very violent."

There was not, it should be noted, a "very violent" transition after the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s. This recession is not unprecedented. It's especially bad. And if the past tells us anything, when the bear market ends the bulls shall run.

It's no accident the iconic 1987 film "Wall Street" is earning a sequel. The savings and loan crisis did not render extinct either the hungry working class broker Bud Fox or the morally unhinged master of the universe Gordon Gekko.

Risk-taking eventually resurges. And so do the vices of risk. "Greed is good" remains capitalism's resilient instinct.

Consider that from 1979 to 1983 more than 9 million Americans were added to the poverty rolls--and more than half of them were from white, male-headed families. Yet during the age of Rambo and Ronald Reagan, masculinity hardly softened in our culture.

Traditional masculinity always outlives its obituaries. Since the 1970s, there have been

revolving periods when writers declare that a "new man" would replace the old.

By the late 70s, in elite circles, the Vietnam War undermined a traditional outlet of chivalrous manhood -- that of soldier and protector. Those once lauded as guardians were labeled baby killers. Formerly noble notions of manhood were said to have fallen with an ignoble war. But the old man survived. In "Play it Again, Sam," Woody Allen revived Humphrey Bogart to sort his life out.

### **Blame the Moneymen and Manhood?**

Wall Street has not changed so much either. Finance remains a male world, but not exclusively. White women made up about a third of management in the financial services industry in 2004, according to one government report. In 2008, about one in three financial advisers and analysts were women.

And yet, women working at the most exclusive Wall Street firms often say they feel more outnumbered. Goldman Sachs' reported in 2007 that only 14 percent of its partners were women, double what it was in 2001, but still meager.

By comparison, financial oversight is not a man's world. Six in ten accountants and auditors, which the Department of Labor defines as jobs that "help to ensure that the nation's firms are run efficiently," are women. About half of Securities and Exchange employees are women.

Wall Street is not so much a masculine world as it is a world that generally attracts a certain kind of mental masculinity. The competition, gamble and potential for great reward, has played a role in keeping Wall Street more male than say accounting.

Salam argues that now, in response to some men's carelessness, women will "domesticate" the "macho" world of finance. It seems unlikely. Women tend to choose professions with more stability, secure benefits and regular hours. Why in riskier times would women suddenly shift toward riskier professions?

And men are unlikely to suddenly abandon the unforgiving world of high risk, constant failure and potentially great reward.

That hard drive for the big bucks is significantly, though not wholly, rooted in mainstream social pressure.

One poll showed that the "provider pressure" subsided between the late 1960s and late 1970s, the height of the "new man" idea and modern women's movement. Those who saw a "real man" as chiefly a "good provider" crawled down from 85-to-90 percent to 67 percent in that period. That shift is hardly one that upended our archetypes. Today only three in ten men say they'd rather stay home and take care of the family, compared to 45 percent of women who say so today and did in the mid 1970s as well. Today, about seven in ten men remain their family's lead wage earner.

Still, the male world of finance may involve deeper instincts. Male investors are generally more optimistic about the stock market, according to Gallup polling. Optimism encourages risk. And there is evidence that men generally exhibit more risk-taking behavior.

The neurobiologist Dr. Louann Brizendine, author "The Female Brain," writes about studies done with toddlers that show young girls are generally more likely to "participate jointly in decision making, with minimal stress, conflict, or displays of status" and boys are generally "not concerned about the risk of conflict. Competition is part of their makeup" as boys "get flooded with testosterone during development."

In fact, one study published last year at the journal of Evolution and Human Behavior took saliva samples from 98 males before they participated in an investment game with a real cash reward. It found that higher testosterone levels made men about 10 percent more likely to make a risky investment.

"Risk-seeking behavior that has enabled men to entrench their power--the cult of macho--has now proven destructive and unsustainable in a globalized world," Salam concludes.

Risk can lead to failure. It is also a catalyst of wealth and, from science to the arts, innovation. (And of course, women are also innovating.) But if risk taking is part of what Salam calls the "cult of macho," certainly society has an investment in supporting that "macho."

### **Why the He-cession Still Matters**

Of course, neither gender monopolizes the blame. Women were significantly more likely than men to take on subprime home mortgage loans, after all. In the end, as feminism has taught us, the problems of one gender are the problems of both. For the most part, we live, sleep and raise our children together.

But as feminism has also taught us, gender matters. If masculinity relates to risk, we are living the repercussions of that risk. But that finance bomb came from an elite circle of men. Millions of other men are effectively that circle's collateral damage.

The American Prospect recently headlined an article arguing "**Don't Call It a 'He-cession.'**" But to ignore what is male about this recession would be like ignoring what is female about the pay gap.

It's not merely that men are losing most of the nation's jobs. Social science shows that job loss has more psychological impact on men.

When reporting for my book a couple years ago, I met a project coordinator at Milwaukee's only dislocated-worker retraining center. He told me a story of a man who for 18 months pretended he was going to work before telling his wife he lost his job. Nearly \$100,000 of their life savings disappeared to keep up the lie. This man was that ashamed.

It's not only jobs being downsized, but also men. And we see the worst repercussions on the city streets. Most homeless are men. Men are more likely to lack health insurance.

Yet imagine if three-fourths of the job losses today were among women? There would be calls for a national response.

Instead, many seem eager to focus on men as culprit and largely ignore him as casualty.

And there are stories all around us that justify our concern for men's welfare. Recently in Iowa, a woman was near drowning. A construction worker had a crane dangle him by an industrial metal chain to rescue her from the raging river. He succeeded and she lived.

We value classic masculinity for more than its most obvious displays. Often, it's the quiet willingness to push on that earns our respect.

No institution more than the federal government is invested in offering a leg up for those trying to push on and find new jobs. This administration has been willing to do whatever it takes to keep big finance afloat. It has, by contrast, not done the same for the big three auto manufacturers.

The stimulus has therefore not only favored women's industries over men's, but by consequence, government policy has effectively supported one kind of man over the other. The nation's recovery is however invested in both men. When half of all job losses are in manufacturing and construction, the workingman's problems are our own.

*David Paul Kuhn is the Chief Political Correspondent for RealClearPolitics and the author of [The Neglected Voter](#). He can be reached at [david@realclearpolitics.com](mailto:david@realclearpolitics.com) and found on [Twitter](#) and [RSS](#)*

---

 [SEND TO A FRIEND](#) |  [PRINT](#) |  [COMMENTS](#) |  [SHARE](#)

---