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Men Hit Hard When Jobs Disappear

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From the cause of the crisis to the size of the debris field to the number of ads that begin "in these difficult economic times..." there is much about this recession that is new to us. We are on an unfamiliar road to an uncertain destination.

Little in our lives will come out of this unaltered; some things may be changed forever. One is the role of men in the American family. Economies heal and jobs return. But the trauma of lost purpose and lost confidence may be another click in a long recalibration of the division of family power.

Crises have a way of escalating trends, such as the way Vietnam ignited a generation already chafing under 50s-era conformity. This one has added yet another dimension to a question that just a few decades ago would have been nonsensical: where does dad fit in?

If this is a kind of tipping point in the balance of gender power, we've arrived here over several decades. An onslaught of events -- from females in the workforce to the need for two incomes to the cost of living to the decline of manufacturing -- has dramatically challenged the male's unquestioned role as provider, protector and lawgiver.

Already:

More than 70 percent of families with children are two-income. Close to 40 percent of mothers work full time. And in one in three couples, wives bring home more than their husbands; one in four when both couple work.

And now this:

Male unemployment in the current recession is a solid two points higher than for women. The downturn has hit hardest where men are most likely to work -- construction, manufacturing and finance. Areas like health care, 81 percent women, have fared much better -- actually adding jobs. Women also heavily populate government and education, two more areas that are holding up well.

It is also becoming clear that this recession brings equal opportunity pain. In the past, lower earners suffered first and most. In this downturn, the color of your collar is no protection. High earners are finding themselves on the street in numbers unseen in recessions past.

Worse, many are in their 50s, normally when men hit their peak earning years and begin the long glide path toward a comfortable retirement. They are locked into lifestyles that carry a heavy monthly tab. Prospects are dim, and time to recover is running out.

Not that women haven't lost jobs, but men appear to be taking it harder -- not surprising in a society where what you do is who you are.

Men at home and women at work is a bellows on the coals of an endless argument -- the division of household work. Certainly, men have taken on more of the responsibility than any generation before. But studies show women still do 70 percent of the work, even though men believe they are doing half.

That allocation of responsibility appears to hold even when mom works and dad remains at home -- a potentially explosive atmosphere when financial tensions are already running high.

A friend, who recently became family provider when her husband became a Wall Street casualty, told me that the threat-alert to domestic tranquility is constant-orange, easily going to red. "Little things so easily become big things," she said. "If I ask him to do a simple thing like pick up a gallon of milk or take one of the kids to practice, there is always this unspoken implication left hanging there: 'I can ask you to do these things because I have a job and you don't.'"

One big problem, according to Randi Minetor, author of *Breadwinner Wives and the Men they Marry* is that many unemployed men, already wounded by what they see as their diminished status, see taking on "women's work" as another blow to their manhood.

Stay at home dads may get applause for their enlightened self confidence. Cultural respect is another matter. In the movie, *Mr. Mom*, Michael Keaton mastered domesticity. But it wasn't a happy ending until he got his old job back -- with a raise.

There is another wrinkle to this recession that may have long term implications. Past experience says that many married women who lose their jobs simply stop looking and ease back into domesticity. Now, for the first time, studies show that men are dropping out of the job search in equal numbers, and the percent of men giving up is rising far faster than for women.

This may all just be a blip; an economically-induced hit to the body of male pride and confidence. Or it may be something more. The roles of men and women -- which have changed so dramatically over the last years, may be in for another adjustment.

As we evolve to an easier acceptance of the equal dispersion of household power, that adjustment may be difficult for men, and also women. Gender roles have been reinforced since the days when fathers provided or families starved. They won't go away quietly.