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The New Father/ Daughter Dance: Changing Lessons in Power

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The backlash followed quickly last month when Maria Shriver's report, "A Woman's Nation Changes Everything," offered its signature sound bite: "the war of the sexes is over."

As the critics and defenders lob statistics at each other (we've come a long way; we haven't come far enough), one thing is beyond debate: the interweave of men, women and power has changed forever. Women have found their comfort level in a world described by Roseanne Barr: "... nobody gives you power. You just take it."

Among the many open questions in the changing relationship of men and women, one has yet to be even raised. How has this rebalancing of gender power affected the connection between father and daughter -- for many women, one of the defining male relationships in her life?

The easy answer is: not at all. Dad is dad. But like all things male and female, especially in a time of dramatic change, answers aren't as easy as they once were.

The issues in rethinking power start early.

The lessons begin with a girl finding her place in the family. For most of history, power resided with the protector and provider. For daughters, the logical route to family power was through the one who has the most of it.

There is no research into how that power is exercised, but radio's Garrison Keillor spoke for many: "The father of a daughter is nothing but a high class hostage. A father turns a stony face to his sons, berates them, shakes his antlers, paws the ground, snorts, runs them into the underbrush, but when his daughter puts her arm over his shoulder and says, 'Daddy, I need to ask you something,' he is a pat of butter in a hot frying pan."

Shere Hite, in [the Hite Report on the Family](#), controversially addressed the tactical advantage -- conscious or not -- that young girls have in securing a place in the family

hierarchy. "Is it possible that girls could have a desire, in their heart of hearts, to 'seduce' the father, emotionally at least, because this would mean having more power in the family...?"

A confluence of influences has changed those dynamics in ways we won't really understand until we see how they play out in the lives of new generations of women.

The time-honored hand-off of a daughter from a father's care and protection to the care and protection of a husband has been disrupted by the revolution in female self-reliance -- in everything from sports to education to the new rules (there are no rules) of dating.

The father's long-standing power base has also changed. Close to 30 percent of households are now headed by women. In two-parent families, more than 70 percent are two-income. Close to 40 percent of mothers work full time and, for one-in-three couples, they bring home more money than their husbands.

The recession has accelerated the economic shift; this one has hit men a lot harder than women, with layoffs highest in the traditionally male-dominated fields like construction and manufacturing.

The connection between a father as sole provider and his status in the family power structure is not absolute, and it will vary by family. But just as clearly, the change in that status is not invisible -- to father or daughter.

There are certainly arguments to support the Shriver Report's declaration of an end to the war of the sexes. But there are just as many areas -- and reworking the balance of power between fathers and daughters is one of them -- where saying the transformation is complete, is like saying Katrina ended when it stopped raining.