STILL A MAN’S WORLD
THE MYTH OF WOMEN’S ASCENDANCE

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Liza Mundy, The Richer Sex: How the New Majority of Female Breadwinners Is Transforming Sex, Love, and Family Simon & Schuster, $27 (cloth)

Hanna Rosin, The End of Men: And the Rise of Women Riverhead, $27.95 (cloth)

The notion that women are outpacing men in economic achievement is becoming a post-feminist rallying cry. A legion of authors laments the man-children whom today’s successful, focused career women are forced to date, coddle, and ultimately dump.

Two recent books, Hanna Rosin’s The End of Men and Liza Mundy’s The Richer Sex, collect the many strands of this tale of women ascendant. These authors are motivated by the same basic facts: women’s attainment of college degrees has surpassed that of men; in early 2010 it briefly appeared that women would be the majority of the American labor force; the proportion of married couples in which the wife earns more than the husband has increased and now approaches 30 percent; unmarried, childless young women who work full time have high earnings relative to similarly situated men; and finally, a majority of workers in the fastest-growing occupations are women.

Together, these facts contribute to an important story that is well established among gender inequality researchers, but which remains a matter of confusion for some journalists and readers. Gender inequality in the economic realm has in fact narrowed dramatically since the mid-twentieth cen-

tury, even as the overwhelming weight of evidence shows that men as a group maintain systematic advantages over women. However, the relative status of men and women is not built from singular data points, but rather from giant moving orbs of data with wide distributions around central tendencies. As the gender gap, then, has grown smaller overall—as the distributions have grown closer together—naturally there are circumstances in which women are doing better than men. The question is how to extrapolate from those circumstances.

Both Rosin and Mundy match selected statistics with compelling anecdotes to form narratives in which women not only are drawing even with men, but also are heading for inevitable economic dominance. But despite their assertions—and the progressive direction of change—there is no reason to expect their projections to come to pass in the foreseeable future. Their skillful writing and anecdotal reporting appear to provide convincing support for a narrative that is fundamentally untrue. And that is not a compliment to contemporary journalism.

That is not to say that Rosin and Mundy are simply replicating each other’s mistakes. The two books diverge considerably despite their shared commitment to a similar over-reaching economic forecast. Rosin’s distortion, exaggeration, and carelessness are so ubiquitous as to undermine the reader’s confidence in her reporting, which mostly reads as a series of shallow caricatures. Mundy’s stories, on the other hand, which seem to draw from a larger pool of interviews, often are interesting descriptions of how modern women, men, and couples navigate the (relatively unusual) situation in which women have more financial clout than their potential or actual partners.

In this sense, Mundy is describing a possible future reality. The question is, will it come to pass on its own, as the inevitable product of economic
rationality? Both books suggest an affirmative answer. But has the battle for equality been virtually won already? Or does equality still require concerted action?

FOR ROSIN AND Mundy, women's rise to the top of the economic heap begins with school. There is some justification for this view.

Women earn the majority of college degrees in the United States, and they are the majority of college students, having established better academic records in high school. To both authors this trend signals a major shift. But women surpassed men as the majority of BA earners in the early 1980s, and that advantage has only marginally increased since then, to 57 percent. Moreover, women continue to earn less at every level of education, and not merely as a function of time spent on family obligations and occupational choices. A recent study by the American Association of University Women, for example, found that even among full-time workers just one year after college graduation, women earn 82 percent of men's average earnings.

For college graduates, fields of study are a big part of the pay-gap story, and a reason not to focus exclusively on overall graduation rates. In the 1970s and 1980s, the segregation of men and women into different major fields decreased markedly, as women began majoring in psychology, biology, communications, and business in greater numbers. But health, education, and English are as predominately female as ever—and math and engineering remain stubbornly resistant to change.

In any event, when it comes to gender, proportional growth in educational programs is no guarantee of commensurate increase in labor market clout. In law and medical school, for example, women peaked at almost half of graduates in the last decade, but women are still less than 40 percent of doctors and lawyers in the 35- to 44-year-old age range, where they earn 72 percent and 81 percent of male counterparts' pay, respectively. The main reason for these gaps is that more women have dropped out of these professions, and more remain in specialties, such as pediatrics and family law, that pay less.

Women have improved their relative status in these high-value fields, but there is no sign of their dominance on the horizon.

In the face of such stubbornness on the part of the data, both Rosin and Mundy single out women's greater progress in the fields of pharmacy and veterinary medicine. These occupations are much smaller and less well paid than medicine, and neither is a steppingstone to physician jobs. Rather than seeing veterinarians and pharmacists as harbingers of future female dominance, then, it might be more accurate to describe them as inadequate safety valves for highly capable and well-educated women. The large number of women in those fields reflects not their upper hand, but rather frustrated opportunities for success in more lucrative and powerful fields.

SO WOMEN ARE getting more education, with limited results in the labor market. How do we go from there to a new day in gender relations?

Here the transition to a postindustrial, service- and knowledge-based economy—in conjunction with declining gender discrimination driven by managerial rationalization—is important. It might seem to be leading inevitably to women's economic dominance. This deterministic story is intuitively appealing: the demands of the economy are shifting dramatically in women's favor, brains have superseded brawn, and social skills have become increasingly important, all of which favors women over men.

In support of this view, both authors use projections by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showing that the occupations with the largest expected growth in the next decade are dominated by women. But that description is superficial—misleading, even.

According to Mundy, nine out of ten occupations with the largest projected growth in the next decade—registered nurses, home health aides, customer service representatives, food preparation and service workers, personal care aides, retail personnel, office staff, accountants, nursing aides, and postsecondary teachers—are majority female. For Rosin it is twelve out of the top fifteen. This is impressive, except that there are hundreds of occupations overall, and with women almost half the labor force, many of those occupations are close to majority female. In fact, the employees of Mundy's top ten occupations made up just 15 percent of the workforce in 2010, and are projected to make up only 17 percent by 2020. The top 15 are projected to increase from 22 percent to just 23 percent of the workforce. The growth in these jobs doesn't represent much of a change on an economy-wide scale. The bottom line is that women are projected to increase their share of the labor force by no more than 1 percent in the next decade.

This should not be that surprising. After the 1960s it was not change in the occupational structure that drove increases in women's employment, but rather the integration of existing occupations. However, integration has been stalled since the mid-1990s,

Despite media hype, women's progress in the workplace is neither inevitable nor unstoppable.
and economic development since then barely favors women over men. Yes, there are more nurses and home health aides today than there were in the 1960s, but there are also fewer maids and domestic servants. And although blue-collar manufacturing jobs have declined, truck driving and construction have not. The decline of manufacturing is no longer shaping our gender story—the industry represents only 8.3 percent of workers. Ostensibly gender-neutral processes of economic transformation are not the sources of women’s progress they once were.

**Women surpassed men as the majority of BA earners twenty years ago, but they earn less at every level of education.**

So many people continue to be so attached to this narrative of women’s rapid advance in the labor force that they haven’t noticed there has been no advance in almost two decades: women occupied between 46 and 47 percent of the labor force every year from 1994 through 2011, the last year for which we have data. This stagnation undermines Rosin’s and Mundy’s accounts, in which continuous and fast-paced change is not just taking us toward equality but beyond it.

And that’s the real danger in their exaggerated stories: creating the impression that women’s progress is inevitable and unstoppable.

**MUNDY AND ROSIN** assume that incomes favor young, single women and that this distribution holds up among married couples, too. Increasing numbers of married women are in fact out-earning their husbands—which is important—but both authors exaggerate the claim.

Women’s higher rates of college completion are not turning into a landslide of female-breadwinner marriages. That is because the majority of couples marry on the same side of the college/non-college divide, on each side of which men’s earnings are systematically higher. And after they marry, couples, with the cooperation of employers, tend to move very efficiently in the direction of male economic dominance. Childbearing, division of labor, and career-balancing practices all favor male breadwinning.

At present, a little more than a quarter of wives in their prime working years earn more than their husbands do, though the numbers are higher if you follow Mundy and Rosin, who restrict the pool to couples with working wives. Mundy calls the imagined impending majority of such families the “Big Flip,” and devotes much of her book to how American men and women fail or succeed at adjusting to it. In this construction, any couple in which the wife earns more than her husband has already undergone the Big Flip, and the rest of the country is sliding rapidly down that path.

However, even when wives earn more, they almost always earn only a little more—which does not give them the authority to establish a “matriarchy” (Rosin’s term) or qualitatively overturn gender relations, as implied by Mundy’s flipping terminology. It’s true that only 7 percent of wives outearned their husbands in 1970, so we have seen a real change in gender relations. If change continues at that pace, women really will be the majority earners in more than half of married couples by midcentury. Also, if world population growth keeps increasing at the rate it has in the past century, the earth will eventually become a ball of human flesh expanding at the speed of light. Neither of these outcomes is a sure bet; predicting the future is not as simple as extending the line on a graph.

Rapid change in the direction of equality has not produced equality. The biggest trend in the income distribution of married couples has been the decline of the zero-earning wife. In 1970, 44 percent of wives earned nothing. Today that figure is 21 percent. However, it is still almost three times more common for the husband than for the wife to be the only earner in the couple. As for the idea of female-dominant newlywed couples, this is rarer than the authors assume. Rosin, to create her illustrations, conducts an online survey looking specifically for such couples and not surprisingly, finds some. Mundy focuses on Atlanta, writing, “Of all the major cities where young women out-earn young men, Atlanta is number one.”

But marriage markets aren’t as simple as pairing eligible men and women together at random. Even in places where the average earnings are a little higher among unmarried women, a few simple sorting preferences produce (straight) couples that overwhelmingly lean male-dominant. The most important preferences are for race/ethnicity and education: most couples match up along these lines. Within racial/ethnic and education groups, men earn more at every level. On top of that, the male partner is usually a few years older. With those parameters set, men will earn more in most couples. If you add an additional preference for higher-earning men within a couple—which is still what most people appear to want, whether they say it explicitly or not—then the male-dominant skew in the resulting marriages is even stronger.

Take Atlanta. Among childless full-time workers there, unmarried young women earn more than unmarried young men, but Census data confirm that just-married men’s incomes are higher than just-married women’s. Three-quarters of Atlanta couples...
marry on the same side of the college/non-college divide, and in cases where both spouses have college degrees, women earn more in just one-third of couples. Overall, only 38 percent of newlywed Atlanta couples have a higher-earning wife. As these couples advance along their careers, that percentage is unlikely to rise.

The growing prevalence of bread-winning wives is an important phenomenon, but it is not the end of gender inequality as we know it, and that prevalence is not irreversibly increasing.

MUNDY HAS ARGUED that her critics, including me, are institutionally wedded to a glass-half-empty form of feminism, which is sliding toward irrelevance as women's progress gains steam. And we have indeed made much progress, as I've outlined above. But there is a lot of room for interpretation and speculation about what will—and should—happen next.

Mundy overreaches and oversells her interpretation. But at least enough of her facts are true that we can have a reasonable debate based on them. The same cannot be said of Rosin. In a blog post defending herself, she writes, "I hesitate to get drawn into data wars .... I've learned over the course of my research that data can support many different stories." But many of Rosin's errors are not matters of interpretation, the inevitable collateral damage from a data free-for-all in which we all focus on different bits of the larger story. Rather, they are factual claims that happen to be clearly and demonstrably untrue. Here are three examples:

1) The unsourced claim that "in Asia"—unqualified by any further detail, such as the name of a country or countries—"the average age of marriage for women is thirty-two." This is false not only for women across Asia as a whole, but also for every country in Asia, where women in the biggest countries mostly marry at or before age twenty (Indonesia, India); in their early twenties (China); or, at the high end, in their late twenties (Korea, Japan).

2) The description of sexual assault rates as "so low in parts of the country—for white women especially—that criminologists can't plot the numbers on a chart," which is nonsensical as well as untrue. Not only are U.S. rates of sexual assault plottable, they are not even low by the standards of wealthy countries.

3) "Women are now lead TV anchors, Ivy League College heads, bank presidents, corporate CEOs, movie directors, scatologically savvy comedians, presidential candidates—all unthinkable even twenty years ago."

With one exception, each of those milestones not only was thinkable but had already occurred twenty years before she wrote, most of them long before. (The exception is a female Ivy League president, which wasn't recorded until nineteen years earlier, in 1993.)

Rosin also has an affinity for sweeping proclamations that do the work of facts without being testable. Thus, "Our vast and struggling middle class

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**Whistle and Snare**

*Broc Rossell*

On the beach I think about vitrifying glass

About tight collars and clean windows beneath

Adolescent clouds, camels carrying tea trays, breaking clouds

That smell to you like the April in every month

Of days that crawl up your skin into the deep cave

Across the fortuneteller's hand

Moths flicker north from wave to welkin

Nibbling air the way you forage

Like lupine through lichen for a slice of hard bread

The halved pear of your back pulled sleek

They repeat themselves and say

All this darkness is transparency and decay

Taking what the rest of me can't

Take like solid blows

While I imagine a single pine needle

Against a clear alpine sky

A green swimming hole for an infinite number of swimmers

An implacable storm gathering its skirts

Seagulls sing of ashes and salt

Even the swallows are crop dusters
... is slowly turning into a matriarchy; women are “taking over the middle class”; and Auburn, Alabama, of all places, has “turn[ed] itself into a town dominated by women.”

And, for the careful reader, Rosin presents an exhausting parade of exaggerations, which are obvious if one consults her endnotes for verification. Some of these are simply aggravating stretches, such as referring to the health and education sectors as adding “about the same number” of jobs as were shed by the manufacturing sector in the 2000s, when the former number was 4.5 million and the latter was 5.7 million, a difference of 26 percent. Others are distorted to the point of falsehood. She wants us to believe that “young women” are earning more than “young men,” but what she really has in mind is a much narrower group: single, childless, female full-time workers ages 22–30. That list of qualifications is indeed awkward, but without it, the fact is not a fact. Elsewhere Rosin reports, “Nearly a third of Brazilian women now make more money than their husbands,” but her citation refers to only 28 percent, and then only among college-educated female full-time workers—a far cry from all Brazilian women. This is an abbreviated list.

**EVEN IF WE** do continue to advance toward gender equality, it might not accompany, or cause, fundamental transformation of gender patterns in those arenas that have been most resistant to change: male dominance of the highest echelons of political, economic, and institutional power; the cultural devaluation of work associated with women; the persistent difference-based gender socialization of the sexes from the earliest moments of childhood; the political domination of women’s bodies by men; and the gendered division of labor, especially that which is unpaid.

Mundy and Rosin miss all this because they embrace mechanical and deterministic narratives of change. There is little apparent role for an active agenda promoting equality beyond the assumption that anti-discrimination laws and practices will advance continuously, driven, one supposes, by the inherent economic rationality of gender egalitarianism. And in these books there is no discussion of organized resistance on the part of men in positions of power and authority.

The economic, political, and cultural changes that motivate Rosin and Mundy are real. For example, there is a competitive price to pay for an old-fashioned attachment to sexism. Modern rationality exerts pressure in the direction of universalism, as the sociologist Robert Max Jackson argues in *Destined for Equality: The Inevitable Rise of Women’s Status* (1998). But these changes also are old news. More pressing now is the question of how to unlock the door between the stalled present and further progress toward equality.

Feminist action on law and policy may now be as important as ever.

In the legal realm, gender discrimination suits are very hard to win unless a man and woman are being paid differently for doing exactly the same job for the same employer, as in the famous Lilly Ledbetter case.

In policy, the United States lags atrociously on vital matters of work-family integration. Specifically, paid family leave might reduce the career consequences of unpaid care-work obligations. Universal preschool education would smooth women’s reentry into the labor force after childbirth while reducing the inequalities in childcare that help reproduce class inequality. And we might even stretch our imaginations to consider a shorter workweek, which besides reducing unemployment could help dislodge the hyper-present “ideal worker” image many hold dear, thereby shaking loose a more gender-balanced family life.

And in the mainstream culture, we need to challenge the crushing norm of intensive parenting and combat the resurgence of highly polarized gender socialization for children. The stalled progress that has become apparent since the mid-1990s arguably reflects a weakened feminist movement—its transformation into an inward-looking program of self-improvement under the mantra of empowerment and choice. Sitting back to watch the tide of women’s dominance roll in will not help.

To these authors, feminism—rarely mentioned—is a cultural trend running as a bit player in the background, integrated into the stream of progress. (Mundy has described institutional feminist actors as a “fempire” of dour naysayers unwilling to accept a future of positive change.) Meanwhile, the men who would stand to lose their privileged position thanks to feminism’s success actually are resisting change. At the low end, many blue-collar men have blocked the entrance of women into their trades, passively or actively. At the high end, the board rooms and executive suites of corporate America are monuments to sexism’s perseverance, with annual progress in women’s representation measured in the fractions of a percent. Active gender discrimination—especially based on women’s status as mothers—continues to plague working women.

We cannot assume a future of continuous, inexorable change in the direction of gender equality, the satiating lullaby of these tall tales. **BR**