

## Men behaving badly?

**Lindsey German**

Over the last 30 years the traditional role of men has been dramatically challenged. Lindsey German looks at a new book which explores the male crisis

What has gone wrong for men? Tales of aggressive female bosses, house husbands and male strippers have led some to argue that the social problems facing men represent one of the major crises of the turn of the century. Men no longer feel 'masculine'. Women threaten them in work, in relationships, throughout education. The old certainties of the family, where the man was breadwinner and the woman was home maker, have been destroyed forever. Men-certainly working class men-are in no position to 'provide'. Their wages are low when they work, and they are increasingly victims of 'downsizing' or 'flexibility' which leaves them without work. Even worse in the eyes of many men, they are forced to depend on their wives for a livelihood. Such a situation has produced a crisis of male identity.

Susan Faludi's new book, *Stiffed*, is an attempt to answer some of the questions about why men and women have changed and what are the consequences of such far reaching changes. It is more than a simple story of men versus women; instead, through the eyes of various men who are symbols of US society, it tells of the destruction of the postwar consensus and with it the end of the American dream. The GIs who fought in the Second World War were immortalised by the journalist Ernie Pyle as

honest and decent fighters for democracy who came back from the war as heroes. A generation later their sons came back from the war in Vietnam despised and disorientated. They had fought a war which few wanted, which they could not win, and they returned to find a society racked with social change-over the war itself, over civil rights for blacks, and, of course, over the position of women.

The upheavals since the 1970s-three recessions, the destruction of many 'old' (male dominated) industries, technological revolutions-have further led to the reversal of male and female roles in many households, the acceptance of a degree of independence for women, the much higher public profile of gays.

This really is a world turned upside down-or so it must seem to those men who expect to retain the dominant position in society and for women to depend on them. It reflects a world where the lives of women and men have changed out of recognition in the past half century. Women work outside the home, rates of divorce have shot up, as has the proportion of children born outside marriage, and women have access to many jobs which would have seemed impossible two or even one generation ago. In many communities-especially those of traditional 'male' skills which are now deemed redundant-women are able to earn more and hold on to more responsible jobs than their husbands.

What effect does all this have on the men? Faludi's book reveals fascinating insights into the minds of contemporary men on the receiving end of many of these changes. She travels the US, talking to Californian shipyard workers whose skills are redundant, young gang members, Vietnam vets, supporters of the Cleveland Browns football team. The message comes across repeatedly: the loss of paid work leads to loss of morale, of dignity, sometimes of marriage, and, most of all, of 'manliness'. In the 1980s and 1990s there were 60,000 job losses at Chrysler, 74,000 at

GM, 175,000 at IBM and 125,000 at AT&T. One military contracts negotiator, laid off by McDonnell Douglas, told Faludi:

'There is no way you can feel like a man. You can't. It's the fact that I'm not capable of supporting my family... When you've been very successful in buying a house, a car, and could pay for your daughter to go to college, though she didn't want to, you have a sense of success and people see it. I haven't been able to support my daughter. I haven't been able to support my wife.'

### **Sex and the single man**

What of the next generations-those who never had the opportunity to work in the shipyards or aerospace factories? Faludi went to Lakewood, a postwar California dormitory suburb built to house tens of thousands of McDonnell Douglas workers, where she met the infamous Spur Posse, a gang which was notorious for scoring points each time they 'hooked up' (had sex) with a girl: 'You had to achieve penetration, and you could only get one point per girl.' One of the gang scored 67 points and appeared on television talk shows, such was their notoriety. Her interviews with them demonstrate appalling attitudes to women on the one hand, but also a sense of self denial-a feeling that somehow women might come out on top anyway. As one says, 'Automatically, they'll throw you in jail just to find out if you did it. Girls can say whatever they want and it's believed.'

The porn industry in California is also investigated. Men are at a disadvantage over employment here too. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that most porn involves men looking at women, so women are more likely to be in demand. The men who appear in the films are often having a relationship with porn actresses, but they are very much in a subordinate role. This leads to problems of impotence, depression and even suicide,

but also to a peculiar sexual double standard, with a level of protectiveness towards 'their' wives and a traditional view of sex roles. One porn actor told Faludi, 'The definition of a man is gone.' His golden age was the 1940s and 1950s, when men could provide 'because the workforce was not flooded with females...the government tricked our women into working and women became men'.

By and large, however, the story that *Stiffed* tells is not a history of the sex war-it is a tale of disorientation and alienation on a massive scale. Repeatedly the impression is of people whose lives, even in the good times, are narrow and often empty; when the bad times come they are pushed over the edge. So one wife of a redundant husband leaves him when he loses his job. A black family in South Central LA is split between one brother who is a hard worker at a local grocery store and cares for his family and sick mother, and two other brothers who are notorious gang members. Faludi interviews the astronaut Buzz Aldrin, once the moon walking hero of all America, now doing miserable publicity appearances in Planet Hollywood restaurants.

A repeated theme is that loyalty is not rewarded. Loyalty to jobs, to football teams, to a country, all come to nothing when confronted with the bureaucracy of the big companies, or the state machine, or the media which manipulates and then drops its transitory stars. The contract which the returning soldiers thought they had with the US ruling class-that they would work hard and in return would achieve a living standard undreamt of by previous generations-has been betrayed. At the same time there is a sense of humanity among these men who feel they have lost their manhood. The personnel managers who try to find jobs for the redundant workers are astonished and frustrated by their sense of the collective. Repeatedly, they say, when they try to help individual workers to a job or

a retraining grant, these men insist on sharing the knowledge with the others-thus diminishing their chances as individuals.

Even more poignant is Faludi's look at the terrible legacy of the Vietnam War. She demonstrates that it was disproportionately the blue collar workers who fought in Vietnam, and she shows what horror was inflicted by US military might. The terrible nature of Vietnam is well illustrated by the fact that its most famous soldier, Lieutenant William Calley, was a brutal war criminal, perpetrator of the My Lai massacre, when a whole Vietnamese village of 400-mainly women, children and old men-was murdered in the most horrific circumstances. She talks to a witness of the massacre, Michael Bernhardt, a soldier who believed in the system and the army, but who eventually testified about My Lai despite army pressure and intimidation.

### The structures of oppression

Stiffed refutes the idea that there is a straightforward set of male patriarchal attitudes, or that these are simply the creation of individual men. The structure of society, its institutions and ideology, the way in which it uses the divisions of race and gender inside the working class-all work to maintain and reinforce the most backward sexist attitudes, and these in turn are reinforced by a whole series of other conservative ideas. The religious and conservative Promise Keepers, the gun worshippers, the irony of the porn actor who asks to hold his wife's hand-all feature as people who fear women's independence, who regard an 'ordered' world as one where the man is head of the law abiding, churchgoing family, and who see issues such as gay rights or positive discrimination as a direct personal threat.

These views are common among the Christian right, which has maintained a level of support in the US. But they are very definitely minority views

among most normal working people-both men and women-in the US and Europe. They are given a lease of life because they are also sanctioned by respected social institutions, including those of governments themselves. Faludi visits the Citadel, the notorious South Carolina military academy which was forced by the courts to admit a woman student, Shannon Faulkner, in 1994. She was driven out within a week. The interviews in and around the Citadel revealed an irrational hatred of women, a high degree of homophobia, and-according to regulars at a local gay bar-much repressed homosexuality. One says, 'The proper terminology for the Citadel is the closet.'

In times of unemployment, downsizing and uncertainty, attitudes which blame women or gays for the problem, or which try to imply that all would be well if only traditional male roles could dominate, can come to the fore. It is the insecurity of US society which reinforces such attitudes and which leads to some of the extremes of behaviour which Faludi outlines. It also leads to a fictitious view of men's and women's roles which may make good headlines but has no connection with the facts. Women are still oppressed, despite the prejudices of these postfeminist days. They are still in lower grade, worse paid jobs, with far fewer opportunities than men in comparable jobs. While it is true that a layer of professional women have made huge gains most women are still at the bottom of the pile jobwise. In the US women now make up 44.4 percent of managers (compared with 16.7 percent in 1970), 46.3 percent of economists (11.4 percent) and 62.1 percent of psychologists (38.5 percent). But they also comprise 93.1 percent of nurses, 84.1 percent of primary teachers and 78.5 percent of lab technicians-figures which show hardly any difference from two decades ago. In the US women earn \$742 for every \$1,000 earned by men, compared with \$594 in 1970.

Hardly a reversal of sex roles. At the same time, however, there have been huge generational changes which have also led to changes in attitudes. Women do expect to work most of their lives, including when they have young children and babies. A significant number of both men and women choose not to get married. So the US figures for 1998 show that over one fifth of women and nearly 30 percent of men aged 30 to 34 have never married. The numbers having children and the number of children they have has fallen sharply. Abortion remains high, and divorce has grown dramatically.

The major question this raises is, why should the improvement in women's lives, and greater choice about how they live their lives, lead to men feeling threatened? The answer lies in the way that men-and women-have been fed an illusion which was bound to create a crisis when it was shattered. The past 30 years has led to a challenging of sex roles which in any really civilised society would be seen as a positive development and something which should be pushed even further. But because men have been taught to invest so much in being a breadwinner-and crucially because capitalism offers no alternative when this role is denied-the loss of such status often leads to bitterness and despair.

The situation that workers find themselves in today is in many ways similar to that faced by the early mill and factory workers in England, caught up in the dramatic changes of the industrial revolution around the beginning of the 19th century, which among other things changed the sexual division of labour inside the textile industry. More advanced machinery meant that over a short space of time male weavers were replaced by women and children. They worked for less money and were more adaptable, so the men found themselves workless. In his brilliant study of Manchester in the 1840s, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Frederick Engels quotes a letter from a worker describing a

friend whom he found at home darning his wife's stockings while she worked in the factory. The friend explains himself as follows:

'Thou knowest when I got married I had work plenty, and thou knows I was not lazy. And we had a good furnished house, and Mary need not go to work. I could work for the two of us; but now the world is upside down. Mary has to work and I have to stop at home.'

Engels writes of this situation that it is the product of an insane system:

'So total a reversal of the position of the sexes can have come to pass only because the sexes have been placed in a false position from the beginning. If the reign of the wife over the husband, as inevitably brought about by the factory system, is inhuman, the pristine rule of the husband over the wife must have been inhuman too.'

He goes on to argue that the family under capitalism has as its binding tie 'not family affection, but private interest lurking under the cloak of a pretended community of possessions'. The maintenance of the family under capitalism has continued to enforce the oppression of women and the sexual division of labour.

Faludi's analysis places a lot of stress on failing fathers. Many of the men she talks to did not have fathers, had violent childhoods, or felt that they could not measure up to their fathers' demands. However, it is clear that we have to go beyond individual psychology to explain this phenomenon in a society where the family as a whole fails its individual members and where men inside the family cannot measure up to the masculine/familial ideal. The vast majority of family members are 'failing' in this sense-which shows how artificial and illogical the family is as an institution.

This points to a much wider failure of the system. The postwar boom failed to keep its promise. Indeed, it is possible to look back on it now as an exception to the norm under capitalism, rather than as typical. But it did create the preconditions for many who had been oppressed for generations



to come to an understanding of that oppression, and more importantly, to fight back against it. However, the capitalist crisis of the past two decades has not been kind to feminism. The insistence of feminists on the theory of patriarchy to explain women's oppression, and their rejection of a class analysis have left them compromising with a system they were once committed to fight against. Faludi seems to have a vague understanding of this, but has no real solution about how society can be changed. Her book will not give you many answers on these questions, but it has massive strengths. Perhaps most importantly, it would be hard to read the experiences in *Stiffed* and still believe that men benefit from women's oppression or that patriarchy rules. For this alone, it is a valuable contribution to our understanding of men, women and sexual roles as we enter a new century.

*Stiffed*, Susan Faludi, Chatto £15

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