

## Dismissed, Denigrated and Demonized

Robert Rosenthal interviews with Guy Garcia on *The Decline of Men*

Just as modern mothers may be saving us from the bank-born recession, I wondered about the state of men in these calamitous days. To better understand why down is the new up, Ad Age spoke with Guy Garcia, author of "The Decline of Men: How the American Male Is Tuning Out, Giving Up and Flipping Off His Future."

**Rosenthal: The title is alarming, Guy. Are American men really that much of a mess?**

Garcia: You should be alarmed. The story of the decline of men starts before conception. Did you know all human beings start life in the womb as a female? It's only when the Y chromosome triggers the production of testosterone that some of us turn into what we recognize as males. With the number of genes in the Y chromosome dropping and testosterone levels down 17% over the past 20 years, some say men as a "species" are facing extinction. I'm personally hoping that won't happen.

**Rosenthal: Me too... Extinction is so ... final. What do we know for sure?**

Garcia: We do know that men are losing traction in high schools. The same is true in colleges, where 59% of all students are female. Harvard professors tell me male students have lost their drive and ambition, women tell me they can't find a guy who's not a dummy, slacker, cheater or loser. Men of every stripe and part of the country are telling me they feel confused, besieged and worried that they have lost their place in society, that they have lost their bearings as men. They sense the male gender is adrift and increasingly dismissed, denigrated and demonized -- by the media, by women, even by other men. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

**Rosenthal: Well that's a real kick in the Titanic. Sure, women have deservedly made their mark and increased their sphere of influence. But "just the tip of the iceberg"? Really? How much worse could it get for us dumb/slacking/cheating/confused losers?**

Garcia: Let's start with the says-it-all title of Maureen Dowd's post-feminist creed, "Are Men Necessary?" The answer, of course, is yes, we are. The reason is that in this great unraveling of gender roles and male identity, one of the casualties has been the nuclear family. Last year, for the first time ever, single people outnumbered married people. **More than ever boys are growing up in single-parent homes without fathers who can guide them into adulthood.** And we've known for a long time that boys who grow up without strong male role models are more likely to drop out of school, make less money, be more likely to use drugs or get in trouble with the law and, ultimately, end up divorced themselves. It's a downward spiral.

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**Rosenthal: So we're paying a real price for being jerks these past few hundred years?**

Garcia: I explain to women that they have a stake in this, too, because the next generation of men is at risk -- these are their sons, daughters' boyfriends, future sons-in-law. So women have a vested interest in what happens next. Also, as bigger consumers of media and most consumer products, women are increasingly setting the social agenda.

**Rosenthal: It's remarkable that the disaster course you describe hasn't been more widely reported until now. Congratulations on that, and thanks, I think. But what are we guys supposed to do? You've delegated much of the repair work to women; they seem to be more competent than we. But isn't it up to us guys to reverse the vicious cycle?**

Garcia: The first step is to begin the conversation. One thing we know is that men do not feel the media is speaking to them. **Men all across the country have told me that they are tired of seeing guys in advertising portrayed as preening metro-sexual, cavemen or clueless slackers** -- sometimes all at the same time! Parents of both sexes are worried about the message that their young boys and girls are getting about men, about their dads.

**Rosenthal: So, it's the media's fault again?**

Garcia: It goes way beyond that. The industries projected to grow in the next few decades are mostly in the service sector, where communication, collaboration and multitasking rule. At the same time many of the industries that favor the physical and mental attributes of males are shrinking or disappearing. Women in their 20s in the 10 largest U.S. cities already out-earn men of the same age. The trend is pretty clear.

**Rosenthal: You talk about the "message" that the media portrays, but let's be honest: Men have brought this on themselves. Whether you look at our politicians (Bill Clinton, Governor Spitzer, Senator Toilet Stall), sports heroes (Clemens, O.J., Isaiah) or CEOs (Kenneth Lay, Dennis Kozlowski, Conrad Black), you witness men behaving badly at the highest level. At the other end of the spectrum, guys seem to be feminized, flimsy and fatuous. What do you make of that?**

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Garcia: Your examples are all symptoms of male decline. Men have been conditioned to be selfish, greedy and aggressive. Infidelity and perfidy are manifestations of insecurity. Society has taught men that it is manly to be competitive, to make as much money as possible, to win at any cost. I would add the war in Iraq and the implosion of Wall Street to the list of troubles that have been brought about by the old-fashioned, swaggering macho approach to politics, economics and life in general. Yet in spite of this -- or partly as a result of it -- other guys have simply given up. They sense that they've lost the high ground (and the future) to women, and they aren't even trying anymore. They've opted out to become jackasses, stoners and slackers. Responsibility is shirked, and adolescence is extended indefinitely.

**Rosenthal: So men are trapped in their own macho stereotypes, turning into man-boys and self-absorbed sissies?**

Garcia: It's very hard to change, not to mention that guys don't like to talk about their problems. Denial, I have been told, is a river in Egypt. But it also is a way to pretend everything is fine in spite of the facts. Still, when the pain factor gets high enough we actually are capable of adjusting our assumptions and behaviors. The first step is admitting that there's an issue that needs to be addressed.

**Rosenthal: Speaking of addresses, isn't Barack Obama a new kind of man?**

Garcia: Does his tendency toward negotiation over aggression, communication over silence and compassion over ruthless ambition point the way to a more humane and sustainable form of masculinity? So far, the answer is yes. Most Americans, male and female, have accepted him as the new model for the world's most powerful man -- and, by implication, all men. That is a big change, and a reason for hope.

**Rosenthal: Outside of the White House, what "new kind of man" might we see emerge?**

Garcia: The new kind of man will take many shapes and forms. That's what's new about him. We know that the old, rigid definitions of manliness are outdated and dysfunctional. Men can no longer hammer women -- or the world, or each other -- into submission without ramifications. That game is over. **It's time for us to resurrect the masculine virtues that are much older than modern society: compassion, generosity, loyalty, modesty, humility, farsightedness, curiosity and patience.**

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### Rosenthal: What are those?

Garcia: That's the point. These words barely appear in our vocabulary anymore. There's one more: courage, as in the courage to change; the courage to be different and not apologize for it; the courage to care about a stranger or cause that does not directly benefit you. And don't forget the courage to frankly admit and talk about the decline of men.

### Rosenthal: So the audacity of men is not hopeless?

Garcia: In his inaugural address, President Obama spoke about a "sapping of confidence across our land" and the need to regain the can-do spirit of Americans as "the risk takers, the doers, the makers of things." These are things that guys are best at; it's why they matter and are necessary. Our country will lead the world again, but it won't happen if the male half of the population forgets what always has made them -- and America -- great.

### Rosenthal: Point taken. What about the marketing implications? Aside from an increase in the sales of video games and pornography, what should marketers know about guys and how to reach them?

Garcia: We know that men, as a group at least, are not reading. Women read twice as many books as guys, and non-pornographic magazines that cater to men are struggling. So what, besides sex, gets our attention? The messages that seem to resonate with men fall into two general categories: escape and reassurance. As men lose economic and social traction they look for ways to relax and forget -- games, sports, physical activities of every kind, travel. Male-targeted reality shows such as "Ice Road Truckers" and "The Deadliest Catch" tap masculine nostalgia for a time when physical brawn and bravery -- not PowerPoint and spreadsheets -- defined manly work.

**Marginalized by society and maligned by the media, men are yearning for anything that tells them, or shows them, that they still matter.** Meanwhile, a multibillion-dollar industry sells goods by reassuring males that they are virile and powerful and up to speed with the latest gear. Deep down inside, every guy knows he's Ironman, even if he's actually an ironing man. Stay-at-home dads are fully aware that their tricked-out Bugaboo baby strollers have fat tires and awesome tech specs. And it's no surprise that James Dyson's space-age DCO7 vacuum cleaner, with its guy-friendly promise to "never lose suction," has become a worldwide best-seller.

### Rosenthal: Well, of course. Who among us isn't totally turned on by the prospect of a perfectly groomed rug?

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**Rosenthal:** As long as we don't sweep our troubles under it.

**Rosenthal:** Speaking of which, I do the cooking in my family. Does that make me a girly man?

Garcia: Au contraire: Cooking, which combines chemistry with creative self-expression, has been reclaimed by modern men who recognize the primordial power of preparing a gourmet meal.

**Rosenthal:** You're preaching to the pulpit, bro! Except for that gourmet part.

Garcia: Just as women once used food to get to a man's heart, men have learned that whipping up a delicious meal is a mutually satisfying way to get something else. Grown guys may no longer have a suped-up Mustang in the driveway, but in the kitchen, they can still get under the hood.

**Rosenthal:** I'm hearing "Little Red Corvette."

Garcia: Zero to 60 in three courses.

**Rosenthal:** Any more news on the fragile male psyche?

Garcia: Early findings from the OTX Modern Male study show that younger men are more likely than older men to be accepting of women as their equals or even their superiors. But those same men are also less optimistic about their future than women their age. This breakdown of confidence has produced a schism in the male psyche, and that insecurity turns up in different men in different ways. Some men retreat, submit or become "feminized," while other guys retrench, bulk up and swagger. The fact that both of these male archetypes exist in every guy is the key to understanding who men are and what they want.

Robert Rosenthal, the SHORT ORDER DAD™, is an international marketing professional, frequent TV and radio host, writer, classically trained cook, and father. He is a partner in the pre-eminent firms of BrightLine iTV and Walton-Isaacson, as well as the big cheese of Rosenthal Heavy Industries, a creative digital-video production company.

Guy Garcia is the CEO of Mentametrix, a research and marketing consultancy based in New York City, and is author of several books, including "The New Mainstream: How the Multicultural Consumer Is Transforming American Business."