

Editorial

Male suicide

Recent studies suggest discrimination in family court contributes to suicide rates

What can drive a man to suicide?

The ultimate act of self-destruction is the eighth most common cause of death in the United States, according to a 1999 report by the surgeon general. More troubling, however, are several recent suicide studies in the United States and Australia indicating that males are four times more likely to kill themselves than females.

This discrepancy prompted other researchers to question why. The results of several recent inquiries point to a disturbing trend: increasingly, men are unable to successfully cope with marriage failure and child custody discrimination in family court. Growing numbers of men seem to be turning to suicide as a "solution."

Since the 1970s, family courts and social workers have been more inclined to grant custody to women, even in cases where the father had both the desire to raise the children, and was better suited economically to care for them. An Australian report said, "There is evidence to suggest that many men sense they are being discriminated against in family court judgments."

While these initial findings are suggestive, more research into the phenomenon of male suicide is necessary; there is relatively little firm scholarship on the subject. Nevertheless, the concern about suicide highlights a growing social problem in the United States: Legal discrimination against men.

In custody cases, for example, the *presumption* is in favor of mothers. Men must actually demonstrate fitness in order to gain legal guardianship over the children. This ironically plays into traditional gender stereotypes: women are presumed to be the nurturing sex, while men are the hunter-gatherers whose proper role is putting food on the table rather than taking care of children. In the modern world, such simple distinctions cannot be drawn, especially when considering child custody cases that are often fraught with complex considerations and mutual accusations, all of which must be balanced to discern the best solution for the children. It seems strange, therefore, to unbalance the scales of justice by introducing old stereotypes about gender roles in child raising into the letter of the law. These situations are best dealt with by considering each case on its individual circumstances, rather than legally-reinforced biases.

As long as the legal system gives automatic preferential treatment to women in family matters, we live in an unjust society. Even though the popular culture propagates the stereotype of men as promiscuous sexual predators uninterested in committing to family or children, the truth is far different. Men love their children just as much as women do, even if the expressions of that affection are different.

When men are forbidden, by a vast array of court employees and social workers, from having a natural relationship with their offspring, it is no surprise that some of them will crack under the pressure. There is, after all, a paternal instinct that can be just as strong as the maternal instinct.

We should consider the suicide data to be an early warning, and bring true equality and common sense to family law.