

'Angry white men' should look to women

The Supreme Court's ruling last week limiting racial preferences in federal programs is one more sign that the nation is in a mood to roll back affirmative action.

President Clinton has already laid out an early campaign strategy of offering "sympathy and understanding" to angry white men who resent such programs.

A March *Washington Post*/ABC News poll showed that three out of four Americans favor cutting back.

Even if affirmative action is rolled back, Democratic and Republican politicians should know that it won't cure the anxiety and anger of white men.

Regardless of economic cycles, companies will continue to cut back management to be more productive, and the number of male-dominated blue-collar jobs will keep shrinking. The changing economy will favor workers who are flexible and well-educated.

Rather than looking for scapegoats, displaced men should learn from those likely to benefit most from the new economic order: women.

In educational achievement, men have been slipping behind in school and college for decades, according to Department of Education studies, while American women of all races have become the best-educated and best-trained in the world.

MOLLY IVINS is taking some time off. We expect her column to resume next week.

Gail Sheehy

In addition, women have shown more willingness to go back to school later in life. More than a million women over 40 are enrolled in college, according to the Census Bureau, compared with half as many men. Today, American women earn more than half of all bachelor's and master's degrees.

If white men, especially older ones, are at a disadvantage, it's likely to be because of inadequate education or resistance to the changing demands of the marketplace.

For the last decade, most new jobs for people with only a high school education or some college have been in clerical, sales and personal-service areas, which are typically considered women's work.

This is one reason that a surprising number of men in their prime are neither working nor even looking for work, according to economists.

But it's not just low-status jobs that are opening up for women. In the last 20 years, the number of businesses owned by women have tripled, and today they employ more workers than all the Fortune 500 companies worldwide.

The economy favors those willing to risk going out on their own, and that's often more appealing to women than the prospect of hitting the glass ceiling in a corporation.

There is no denying the dislocation men feel. During the last 20 years, the

median income for men has remained flat or declined (in constant dollars) in every age group except for those over 65, while women's rose 18 percent.

And for men forced out of a secure position, the loss can be "like a death," as one corporate refugee said to me. Psychotherapists say that more and more of their patients are men over 45 seeking help for anxiety and depression. The men who are apt to be worse off are those accustomed to success.

Now society is saying: "Sorry, we're downsizing. Here's the package." They are being paid to go away.

Often these men must turn to their spouses for financial help, causing strain at home.

An executive who "took the package" at Eastman Kodak in 1991 at the age of 51 told me, "My wife goes off in the morning now, and I make her breakfast."

Studies show that the higher the percentage of income that the wife provides, the higher the likelihood of divorce.

There is, however, good news for men — or anyone — who must for whatever reason give up their original professional identity.

Change often forces people to grow in ways that they never anticipated, as older women who have experienced the dislocation of divorce or the emptying nest have always known.

GAIL SHEEHY is author of *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time*, about how stages of adulthood have changed for men and women. She wrote this for *The New York Times*.