

Outdated Gender Norms Continue to Haunt Women's Workplace Advancement

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Abstract

Despite women's gains in today's workplace, there is still a long way to go toward gender parity. One factor contributing to inequity is social norms related to gender that do not reflect the reality of our modern world. The current paper reviews recent research that demonstrates the (often hidden) ways traditional gender roles hinder women's advancement in the workplace, cause family stress resulting from household labor disputes, and prevent many talented women from following their aspirations. We conclude with recommendations for changing the social narrative.

Women have shattered many glass ceilings over the past few years. In the US alone women have expanded further into leadership roles in corporations and within each branch of the government, including the vice presidency. More women than at any other time in history are high-ranking executives at Fortune 500 companies and the primary breadwinners within their families.^{1,2} In 2020, women held 21.2% of the corporate board-appointed officer positions and, in the first quarter of 2021, women held 8.2% of CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies.^{1,3} Women's ascendance in industry is partly a reflection of women's achievements in education.

US women currently earn 57.3% of bachelor degrees, 60.1% of master's degrees and 53.5% of doctoral degrees,⁴ and 51.5% of the paid workforce are women.⁵ Female enrollment in the top 50 MBA programs currently stands at nearly 39%.⁶ When women have the opportunity to build a career and create independent wealth, many take that path.

Despite women's gains in today's workplace, there is still a long way to go toward gender parity. For example, in 2020, women earned 84% of what men earned in the same position.⁷ One factor contributing to this inequity is that our societal expectations remain consistent with the idea of men as breadwinners and women as home-tenders.⁸ These traditional gender roles are a vestige of human history that has little functional value in today's world. Traditional gender roles emerged from a past when women had less control over their fertility and the energetic demands of pregnancy, lactation, and extended childcare led to a division of labor via marriage, whereby women stayed home and contributed to unpaid care work while men participated in the paid labor force outside the home.⁹

This historical division of labor had more value before the advent of birth control and modern family planning methods,¹⁰ and subsequently gave rise—long ago—to the social values that remain connected to these obsolete gender roles.¹¹ Even as women advance in the workplace and organizations create more opportunities for women, the socially imposed norms that place value on marriage and family, especially for women, remain.¹² These traditional stereotypes create hidden biases that hinder women's advancement in the workplace, cause marital stress resulting from household labor disputes, and can even prevent many talented women from following their aspirations.

Recent data show that Americans (men and women) still view men as financial provider and women as caretaker.¹³ For example, in one study of heterosexual married couples with female breadwinners who provide 80-100% of the household income, only 38% actually reported that the wife was the primary breadwinner.¹⁴ This finding could reflect the fact that even high-earning women are expected to be the primary caregivers at home. Consistent with this interpretation, studies of stay-at-home men who contribute more to unpaid- than paid-labor found that these men tend to dedicate most of their time at home to masculine-typed housework, such as yardwork,¹⁵ leaving much of the other housework for women. Despite more women working outside the home than ever before, modern women are taking on even more childcare than did mothers in the 1960s.¹⁶

Ironically, research finds that women who earn more than their husbands often take on *more* housework than those who earn less, perhaps in an effort to uphold traditional roles within their marriage.¹⁷ Unfortunately, this suggests that modern women are putting even more pressure on themselves because of the guilt and shame associated with putting career before family.

A recent investigation by one of us tested the predication that women often conceal career aspirations and are less likely to pursue high profile careers because of social forces, not lack of interest. In a series of

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experiments, our research team altered college women's perceptions of the number of men nearby. As we predicted, women become more ambitious and prioritize high-profile careers when there are few men around.¹⁸ However, when the women thought there were many men around, they said that they prioritize caretaking over career. Trends in the US mirror these experimental findings. As the number of young adult men in an area decreases, the percentage of women in the highest paying careers increases (e.g., surgeon, lawyer, engineer).¹⁸

This pattern is consistent with findings from other research.¹⁹ Women become more risk-seeking and competitive in their careers when they are in same-sex (not opposite-sex) groups.²⁰ In societies where women are in authority (i.e., matrilineal cultures), women are more competitive than men are.²¹ When women believe men will not see their answers, they report higher desired yearly income, increased motivation to build their career, and more desire to travel for work.²² In public, when it is possible men will see their answers, these same women report lower desired income, less motivation to build a career, and less desire to travel for work. Women also publicly list more goals they hope to accomplish in life than men do and tell others that they wish to succeed at both family and career.²³ The contrast between what women say in public versus how they express themselves in private is evidence that women experience internal and external pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles. When others “are not looking,” many women lean into their careers.

Women's *revealed* preferences—those found more often when women feel others are not seeing their answers—demonstrate that many women desire to advance their career when they feel safe, valued, and supported doing so. Revealed preferences are different from *stated* preferences that often arise in research due to our desire to respond in ways valued and expected by others.²⁴ Because many young women and girls want to advance to high-profile careers, our social values must change in lock step with the doors that are opening for women in today's workforce. It is not enough to advance women through opportunity; the path to equity must ensure inclusion. This means flipping our social script.

We must support turning women's intrinsic career motivation into public expression. Here are four catalysts that may ease the grip of traditional gender roles:

- (1) We have to shift our values. We tell young girls, and show them through our actions, we value their nurturing behaviors (e.g., “my sweet angel”). We tell young boys, and show them through our actions, we value their competitive behaviors (e.g., “my champ!”).¹⁹

Our culture and behavior still values nurturing women and competitive men.²⁵ An effort must be made to mitigate traditional norms to ensure children (boys and girls) hear, see, and feel that their value is found in both competition and nurturing (i.e., work and family). This narrative must thread through our homes, schools, governments, and workplaces, and guide our behavior. Once our behavior changes (i.e., the descriptive norm), our values often change with it (i.e., the injunctive norm).²⁶

- (2) The division of labor in our homes must involve greater gender equity in time spent on career and family. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the needle is already moving in the right direction. Research at the Rutgers Business School's Center for Women in Business shows that since the pandemic lockdown, men are contributing more at home (albeit not to the same level as women), and the more men contribute, the more satisfied, and productive women are at work.²⁷ Nevertheless, the imbalance remains stark.²⁸

Because households, just like organizations, run more efficiently when each person specializes in, rather than implicitly shares, a type of labor,²⁹ couples may benefit from an explicit division of unpaid labor that involves each partner taking on unpaid labor that they prefer and are particularly good at. An explicit agreement about unpaid labor specialization may not only enhance work satisfaction, it can enhance partner interdependence and greater relationship satisfaction.³⁰

- (3) The core values of organizations must change to prioritize the balance of career and family. This can happen through flexible programs for all employees, whereby both men and women feel rewarded for taking advantage of them. Companies that prioritize employee well-being stand to benefit in multiple ways. From greater access to, and retention of, a diverse pool of highly skilled talent to a healthier bottom-line.³¹
- (4) Men must lean in to their families and take advantage of family leave programs at work. Fathers who take paternity leave invest more in family life, which benefits children and reduces the household labor burden on mothers.³² New fathers who take a leave of absence around the birth of a child are more involved in childcare activities throughout a child's life.³³ Some prior research has shown that fathers who take leave reduce the household wage gap between fathers and mothers by increasing the mother's wages, as well as the total household income.³⁴

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When women feel valued for their career aspirations and men feel valued for their family involvement, the side effects include greater personal well-being, closer families, better marriages, faster innovation, and a more efficient economy.³⁵

Part of our reality today flows from what worked best years ago. The good news is that when outdated social values no longer serve us, we have the power to uproot the remnants and change course.

Authors

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