

How Changing Sex Roles Have Affected the Family Unit in the United States

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Preface

This unit addresses important issues in American society today. These issues are sometimes confusing to different sectors of our society, and so a survey of them may be helpful to students.

Sex roles and sex-role stereotyping are the topics of the first and major section of the unit. It summarizes the development of sex roles throughout American history, with a focus on the women's movement.

The second part of the unit considers how changes in sex roles have affected the structures of families and the emotional lives of their members. The once distinct sex roles in the family have become diverse thus resulting in some changes in family structure. Emotional effects include the stress and anxieties people experience as a result of changes in sex roles.

This unit is intended for use in a 9th grade Physical Science class for a period of two to three weeks. (The curriculum used by New Haven Science teachers includes a unit on sex education for 9th graders) The basic text that I use is *Masculinity and Femininity* (see bibliography.)

The main objective of this unit is to increase awareness of the roles males and females play in society, of how these roles develop and change, and of how recent changes have affected family life.

I. History of Sex Roles in the United States

A. Definitions

There have been many eloquent and well-worded definitions of the term *sex roles*, but simply stated a sex role is an expectation of a person's behavior based on whether the person is male or female. Each society organizes its sex roles into categories which we may refer to as *sex-role stereotypes*.

To explain sex roles and sex-role stereotypes, we may use the example of actors in a play. An actor or actress takes on a role, a character in the play (sex role). The writer (society) constructs a storyline (stereotype) for the thespians to act out, and the director (parents, friends, authority figures) sees to it that the story line is followed. Some deviation may be attempted and allowed, but usually the actors adhere to the story line.

B. The Development of Sex Roles

During the late 1700's and early 1800's, sex roles and sex-role stereotyping were not major topics of interest in the United States. At that time, the United States was mainly an Agricultural society, although the Industrial stage of our history was beginning.

The adult male role included:

- a. earning an income in one way or another—most men had farms or plantations, or were farm laborers. Also, at that time, there were many craftsmen, merchants, and men employed in government.
- b. supporting and defending a family.
- c. being strong, independent, and self-reliant.
- d. working in the fields and marketing farm produce.

The adult female role included:

- a. the responsibility to have and to care for children.
- b. running a household under the supervision of a husband.
- c. if necessary, assisting a husband in farm or garden labor.

Running a household and caring for children was a “full-time” job. It usually included cleaning, preparing and cooking the meals, canning and bottling the farm produce, and providing for all needs of the husband and children.

Children were taught their roles when very young. Boys were shown how to farm and provide for in their future families’ needs. They went to school where they were taught the basics along with being introduced to career alternatives. Higher education was available.

Girls learned how to do the household chores, and received some basic education. Higher education was not opened for women until 1837, and even then only to a very limited degree, hence career alternatives were not available for them. Girls were taught how to be wives and mothers.

Surprisingly to some, there were feminists then. They were usually thought of as unfeminine, sinful women who preached the devil’s words. Some feminists did take on manly ways, like cutting their hair short, but the majority were feminine and married. They were chided by the church, by most men, and by some women who did not understand their outspokenness. Feminists advocated equality of the sexes in education and careers. They also campaigned and rallied for the right to vote. Women’s rights were not all these feminists fought for; they also opposed slavery.

Early feminists were few in number but did make great gains in a few areas. Partly as a result of their work, slaves gained their freedom in 1865, and high schools and many colleges were opened to women by the end of the 1800’s.

Between the mid 1800’s and early 1900’s, industrialization had affected much of the country. Completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1868 strengthened the country’s move into the ‘Industrial Age’. This era allowed and accommodated movement of people and businesses, and brought on new developments for the sex roles.

The male world expanded and men had the opportunity to take up new careers and the freedom to move around the country more conveniently. They were still the breadwinners in the family. Most men learned how to deal with the expanding world by using assertive, aggressive, domineering skills they had developed in the home. Males overwhelmingly dominated our government, legal and medical agencies.

Women’s roles during this time also changed but not as much as men’s. Women’s primary roles were still homemaker and child care. Some women, mostly from the lower class, entered industry by using domestic skills in their factory work, like weaving and tailoring. Women employees were attractive to company owners because they were paid considerably less than men. Widows and unmarried women made up the majority of the female working force. Once married, most middle class women took to caring for the home and children. Lower class, married women were encouraged and allowed by their

families, to stay in the working force, mainly for financial reasons. Married women who also held a job had two jobs, one unpaid, the other underpaid.

The move westward, even before the railroad was completed, revealed that women could take on a challenge and demonstrate physical and emotional strength. Women as well as men displayed courage, perseverance, and a sense of adventure. Men and women worked together equally to develop the western frontier. This form of equality between the two sexes, liberated from the sex-role stereotypes of the rest of the country, may have been the first break-through for the two sexes. History shows us that they were the first to accept the fact that women as well as men had rights. Wyoming was the first territory to give political equality to women. The first legislation for equal employment was passed in Illinois in 1873. And in 1917, Jeannette Rankin of Montana was the first woman ever to serve in Congress.

Sex roles had not changed drastically in the early 1900's. Men were still the primary breadwinners and women, whether working outside the home or not, still had most of the passive responsibilities of homemaking and child care.

During the 20th century the women's movement has had its ups and downs. Even though, in 1920, women won the right to vote, sex roles had not changed drastically. Women were gradually moving into the male-dominated labor force, and the home became mainly a meeting place for the family to gather together at the end of the day.

Unemployment during the Great Depression forced some men to do more work in the home which was an education for some. Generally, it had been years since men actively worked in the home.

World War II brought many women into the labor force because of a shortage of men. Women helped to run the country at this time, and took active roles in the traditionally male-dominated world. Upon the return of the veterans, some women went back to their homes, but others stayed on their jobs. The opportunities for women were broadening and some women began making careers for themselves outside the home.

The feminist movement continued quietly, and by the early 1960's had developed into a strong organization with lobbying groups. Their efforts paid off in 1963 when the Equal Pay Act was passed by Congress. Women began venturing out of the house more and more into financially feasible careers.

Women took up careers in many fields including medicine and politics. In 1974, Ella Grasso was elected governor of Connecticut, the first woman to achieve the office of governor of any state on her own (she did not succeed her husband).

Other noteworthy women politicians are: Rep. Millicent Fenwick, (N.J.); Rep. Shirley Chisholm, (N.Y.); Sandra O'Vonner, a Supreme Court Judge; Dixy Lee Ray, governor of Washington.

Politics is not the only traditionally male-dominated area that has begun to accept women. The medical field has opened up for women who may like to go beyond the traditional role of nurse and nursing is now open to men.

There are now professional sport leagues for men and women, but usually the purses (winnings) are much smaller for the women's tour. Some women have infiltrated male sports' like auto racing and horse racing.

Women are also allowed to join the Armed Services, although combat duty is restricted. Military academies (Air Force, Army, Navy) opened their doors to women in 1976. Also admission to prestigious universities has been opened to women within the last twenty years.

These examples of the gradual move away from male dominance in our society demonstrate that women have the abilities to be competitive, aggressive and mobile.

Also men are taking on roles that were once deemed 'female' like nursing, home-making, and elementary school teaching.

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is a proposal that, had it passed, would have insured (at least legally) equality of rights regardless of sex. There was much resistance to passing this amendment to the constitution partly because of misinterpretation of its provisions. Many people predicted it would lead to drafting women into the armed services and to a large-scale exodus of women from their home-maker roles. Although the defeat of the ERA has created a perhaps temporary obstacle to total equality of human rights, the women's movement has come a long way and achieved much.

(See bibliography for further reference on this topic)

II. The Effect on the Family

A. Family Structure

For many people the ideal American family is the nuclear family consisting of a father, mother, and children. The nuclear family has been and still is the model family-type in the U.S. But some Americans, during the agricultural era, lived in extended families. An extended family includes two or more married couples—a man and his wife and one or more of their married children, as well as their unmarried children; and it may include yet other relatives of the household head such as a brother, a sister, or a widowed parent. Working the land and keeping it in the family were two reasons families chose to stay together. Lack of convenient transportation and employment limited the possibilities for movement. Poor communication systems also tended to keep families geographically close together.

Most immigrants coming into the country lived in the 'nuclear-family' form. As individuals earned enough money to get out of the ethnic neighborhoods, some remained in nuclear families, while others set up different living arrangements, like living alone, having roommates, living in boarding houses, and delaying marriage.

The divorce rate has steadily increased since the turn of the century. Recent findings have shown that one-third of all marriages in America end in divorce. According to a report based on the results of the 1981 Census, the number of single-parent families has doubled since 1970 (the last census) and 90% are headed by women. The number of single-parent, male-headed families has doubled since 1970, but is still small relative to the number of female-headed, single-parent families. Two-parent families still make up 79% of American families although it was a drop from 88% in 1970. The differences in the percentage is somewhat misleading; the number of two-parent families was 24.9 million out of 31.5 million families in 1981, only a 2% drop from 1970.

Some people have blamed "the destruction of the family" on the women's movement, but in fact "the family" has not been destroyed but lives on in various forms. The women's movement is only one issue in our ever-changing society. Family structures have changed but only partly as a consequence of changes in women's roles. And women's roles have changed not only as a consequence of the women's movement but also as a consequence of the changing economy. Our economy is now dominated by "white-collar" and service jobs as well as by industrial labor, and women make up a large part of the "service sector".

(See bibliography for references on this topic—specifically Alvin Toffler's, *The Third Wave*, Chapter 17)

B. Emotional Effects

Since our early history, when families were close-knit and had little to fear by way of change in family structure, we have developed into an ever-changing society. The changes have been brought about by modernization of communication and transportation systems, the economy, and the women's movement.

It has been documented that women, throughout the years, have yearned for opportunities to try to be successful outside of the home. When these opportunities arose and were taken many often led to emotional conflicts. Most men have gradually accepted women in the career world but some men have difficulties with the idea of women executives. Women are often anxious about entering the male-dominated career world and experience guilt feelings about not being "proper" women and either "neglecting" or not having families.

Books like *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Cinderella Complex* and *The Hite Report* address the problem of the guilt feelings women have felt upon leaving or not entering the home and entering the career world. Early feminists had a lack of female role models other than wife-mother-homemakers, and some took on manly ways because the only role models in the career world were male. So emotions were confused.

Men also had difficulties accepting and adjusting to changes in women's roles. Men had to adjust to having women around them at their job sites and some felt that women were filling positions that an unemployed man should have been given. Men felt that their traditional role as provider was being threatened, so some men did not allow their wives to enter the labor force. Many men whose wives worked outside the home also felt that their wives were responsible for all home-making and child-care jobs. Marital problems often resulted from this, mainly from women who resented the dual burden.

The problems of mixing career, marriage and parenthood have been alleviated by the development of more pre-kindergarten schools and child-care agencies, and the extra income may pay for a nanny. Also there are some companies that allow people to set their own schedules, or that allow job sharing where two people share the hours of one full-time position.

The American family has taken on many forms and has undergone changes throughout our history. These changes do not indicate the downfall of 'family' but give rise to a variety of family structures, each with their own individual attributes and individual problems.