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USA

The Trump-Era Gender Wars, Brought to You By Neoliberalism

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We're seeing an alarming revival of archaic gender role ideas, from the manosphere's remasculinization crusade to trad wives' rejection of public life. Veteran historian of gender roles Stephanie Coontz explains the moment's deep economic undercurrents.

In Dallas, Texas, a wellness influencer urges the crowd at a conservative [women's conference](#) to turn away from work and toward the family. "Less burnout, more babies!" podcaster Alex Clark says to raucous applause. "Less feminism, more femininity!"

Outside of Cincinnati, Ohio, suburban families are building a [commune](#) suffused with the ethos of Make America Healthy Again, emphasizing natural living and traditional gender roles. "Whatever this feminist BS is — chase a career, leave your family — it's not working," says one community member, a former small business owner who's now a stay-at-home mother and vaccine skeptic.

From Washington, DC, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth boosts an [interview](#) CNN conducted with his church's [pastor](#), Doug Wilson. "Women are the kind of people that people come out of," Wilson says, not the kind of people who should be allowed to vote. "The wife and mother, who is the chief executive of the home, is entrusted with three or four or five eternal souls." She's got enough on her plate already.

As for men, Hegseth sharply distinguishes between [two variants](#). On the one hand, in his own words, there are

"red-blooded American men," "strong men," "fighting men," "courageous men," "rock-ribbed men," "masculine men," "tough" men, "normal dudes," "cowboys," and "alpha males."

And on the other,

"candy-asses," "pussies," "whores to wokesters," "effeminate," those who "suppress natural masculine instincts for honor," "beta-male[s]," and "so-called men."

Since the 2024 election, the gender role noise seems to only be growing louder. Nearly everyone agrees that society has gone [off the rails](#), that [something valuable](#) has been misplaced — and a growing portion ardently believes that the path to [restoration](#) runs through men's and women's re-embrace of our innate sex-determined purpose. Project 2025 frames this imperative in high-stakes civilizational terms, [warning](#) that "the very moral foundations of our society are in peril."

For those of us who came of age in the 1990s or later, ideas about sanctioned male and female social roles are not foreign. But they've primarily operated as a series of tacit assumptions and silent expectations, with bolder articulations confined to the religious right. Now, they're morphing into a quasi-secular gospel preached in fiery defiance of the modern establishment.

In this interview, veteran activist and historian Stephanie Coontz sheds light on the contemporary resurgence of gender role orthodoxy. Coontz has authored seven books on marriage and family life, including *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*; *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*; and *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, which was cited in the US Supreme Court decision on marriage equality. After decades of researching the dynamics of gender-based social expectations, Stephanie Coontz brings a unique perspective to the reactionary ideas currently swirling in the mainstream discourse.

Coontz has spent many decades steeped in political struggle. She was arrested during Berkeley's Free Speech Movement in 1964, was a high-profile spokesperson and national organizer for the anti-Vietnam War movement, and was active in the early women's movement. She is director of research and public education at the Council on Contemporary Families and a professor emerita at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Her forthcoming book, *For Better and Worse: The Problematic Past and Challenging Future of Marriage*, is due out from Viking Press in early 2026.

Her academic work emerged from a desire to move beyond simplistic narratives about women's oppression or triumph, seeking instead to understand men's and women's complex interactions with each other in relation to the broader political-economic context — a line of inquiry that led to her first book, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families, 1600–1900*. Coontz approaches her historical work with a universalist sensibility, attuned to the pressures that bear down on men and women alike.

Coontz spoke to *Jacobin* about the enduring political salience of gender, where “traditional” men's and women's roles come from, how capitalism shaped contemporary sex expectations, and how neoliberal economic devastation has resulted in an existential impasse, fueling an alarming revival of reactionary gender ideas half a century after the feminist Second Wave.

Meagan Day - I want to start with some polling data that I think is quite striking. The share of Republican men who agree that women should return to their traditional roles in society [increased](#) from 28 percent in May 2022 to 48 percent in November 2024, and Republican women's agreement also jumped considerably during that period. Another survey found that the share of Republicans who agree that society is too accepting of men who take on roles typically associated with women [increased](#) from 18 percent in 2017 to 28 percent in 2024.

These aren't majorities, but they're notable trends. How should we think about this phenomenon?

Stephanie Coontz - Yes, also the partisan divide on same-sex marriage has hit its [largest gap](#) in almost thirty years. The “[manosphere](#)” is getting a lot of attention, and so is the “[trad wife](#)” thing. Overall, there's been an increase in the number of people, especially people who identify as Republican or conservative, expressing nostalgia for “traditional” gender roles and ideals. Much of that is polarization, with Republicans getting more conservative as Democrats get more liberal on several issues. But in 2024, there was a dramatic [conservative swing](#) in the political self-identification of youth. In 2020, 55 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds said they identified as Democrat or leaned that way versus only 37 percent Republican. But in 2024, Republicans gained the advantage: 47 versus 46 percent.

I think these changes tell us that people's anxieties about recent social trends have been exacerbated in recent years, especially in the period leading up to the 2024 election. But they certainly don't paint a return to tradition across the board. For one thing, just one year later, the same youth poll in 2025 has eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds [reporting](#) 49 percent Democrat to 42 percent Republican. That makes me wonder if the 2024 swing wasn't a reaction to the Democrats' blindness about the economic pressures people were feeling and their misguided insistence on how well the “Biden economy” was doing.

For another, to get back to gender and sexuality, in 2025, [68 percent](#) of Americans still say they support same-sex marriage. That's down from [71 percent](#) in 2022 and 2023, but it's higher than at any time between [1996 and 2019](#). And not only do polls consistently show [high support](#) for men and women sharing housework and childcare, but researchers have also documented a [substantial increase](#) in men's actual share of what we used to call "women's work" over the last two decades.

If you drill down, it's more about the sense that life was easier when men could earn enough to support a family and people had more family time.

I'm not saying we shouldn't take the nostalgia for "traditional" gender roles seriously. And I think the new, or at least newly visible, viciousness in the "manosphere" is very concerning. But I also think we have to be more sensitive to the pressures and dilemmas that make people susceptible to these messages. Yes, many people do cling to a real belief in male superiority, and it's quite common for people who start as benevolent sexists to turn into hostile sexists when women reject patronization, as women have been rather militantly doing recently. But in other cases, if you drill down, it's more about the sense that life was easier when men could earn enough to support a family and people had more family time. When you combine that with the very real losses in economic options, security, and respect that working-class and even many middle-class young men have experienced, and the disrespect that many privileged men and women show for older kinds of masculinity, then I think some of this is understandable. Not just among men but women too, because a lot of their "careers" have turned out to be far less "fulfilling" than promised.

Working-class men and rural communities have experienced an ongoing, slow-motion crisis since the 1970s. In my new book, I argue that the crisis originates in a systematic campaign to overturn the New Deal's restrictions on the prerogatives of banks, corporations, and inherited wealth and to blame the resultant losses for white working-class men on the Great Society reforms that tried to extend those New Deal protections to women, black people, and other minorities. But to the extent that many liberals have been touting their (mostly sound-bite) support for the liberal social agenda without attaching that to vigorous opposition to the corporate economic agenda, they've made it easier for the right-wing to push the idea that it's the gains for women and minorities rather than the gains for Wall Street that have hurt workers.

When Hillary Clinton ran for president, I would watch her debates, and she would give these long lists of how we need to support the rights of women and gays and lesbians and transgender people, all of which I'm in favor of. Still, I would scream at the television, "Would you add a farmer? Would you add a machinist?" That neglect of class issues makes it much easier for the Right to pretend that it's not economic inequality but rather cultural diversity that has led to the disrespect and loss of security for white working-class men.

Meagan Day - What are the real causes of the profound sense of disrespect and humiliation among the working class, and particularly working-class men?

Stephanie Coontz - The most fundamental cause is the reversal of the growth of real wages and economic security that marked working-class family life in the postwar period up to the early 1970s, and the resultant surge in inequality that encouraged the so-called "winners" in society to cultivate social tastes and surround themselves with luxuries that an older generation of capitalists generally kept discretely out of sight. And this has devalued an older masculine work ethic that emphasized doing work that was hard and often unpleasant but allowed you to support and protect your wife and kids who in turn gave you gratitude and respect for your sacrifices.

That masculine work bargain — making physical and mental sacrifices to support and defend your womenfolk, and getting their gratitude, admiration, and services in return — has not paid off for the past half century. We all know about the losses in terms of economic progress, the pride in knowing that you are going to do better than your father and your grandfather. But men also feel that they aren't respected for difficult blue-collar jobs, for mechanical skills, for being able to do hard work.

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To top it off, other experiences of disrespect have multiplied over the past forty years. It used to be that everybody had to wait on the phone a similar amount of time to get help or had to wait in lines a similar amount. Now we're seeing the "premiumization" of everything, with people of means being able to pay to jump every line and get all sorts of extra attention. Some studies show that when people have to board a plane through the first-class cabin, it leads to increases in air rage incidents.

I think this kind of inequality is especially hard for men to cope with, because one of the key elements of masculinity ever since the rise of democratic ideology has been the promise that unlike in aristocratic society, you don't need to kowtow to people with more wealth than you; they can't insist on the rituals of submission that lower-class men used to have to make to high-status men. You're a man; that in and of itself entitles you to respect. One old logger I interviewed one time told me that it was one thing to take orders from the foreman or the boss, but when you were off duty, you didn't have to step aside for anyone. Now you not only have to stand aside to let rich people go first — you hear them making fun of you because you order your steak well-done and don't know what arugula is.

Meagan Day - We're talking about a specific version of masculinity characterized by hard-edged, independent, competitive, unemotional performance in the public sphere, which is supposed to be exchanged for rewards of love and gratitude in the private sphere. But it's really important not to naturalize this ideal. This is something that emerges only after industrial capitalism flourishes in the nineteenth century. What were gender roles like before?

Stephanie Coontz - Male dominance is not universal, but it became very widespread across the world for historical reasons I've explored in various books. But what gives me hope that we can change that is that, despite its prevalence, there are huge differences in what traits are thought to be associated with masculinity.

For example, in hunting-and-gathering societies, a man who is a braggart or a bully is not admired but ostracized. The hunter whose arrow downed the animal doesn't get a bigger share of the meat, and he never brags about his kill. When I first read about hunting-and-gathering societies, I thought that they were just intrinsically better people than we are. What I've gleaned instead is that they could see and penalize bad behaviors more easily than we do, and they had fewer sophisticated and complex ways for people to monopolize resources and manipulate and deceive.

In aristocratic patriarchal societies, men, not women, were seen as the altruistic, self-sacrificing sex. Women were thought to be more selfish, more ambitious for their personal families, more prone to sexual excess, and more manipulative. Men were supposed to be brave and decisive, but they, or at least upper- and middle-class men, were also credited with tremendous emotional sensitivity. Right up until the nineteenth century, it was not the least bit unmanly to cry. In the twelfth-century "Song of Roland," when Roland dies, twenty thousand men weep, faint, and fall off their horses in their grief. There's an old medieval poem called "The Wanderer," in which one of the things the guy who's been sent into exile talks about is how he misses sitting at the knee of his lord and laying his head there in gratitude for the lord's generosity and love.

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Even in the early modern era, even as men began to be seen as "breadwinners," a word that didn't come into use until the 1820s, men were not immediately seen as people who had to be emotionally self-contained and taciturn. Historians such as Richard Godbeer and E. Anthony Rotundo have discovered wonderful letters and diaries of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century men talking about how much they love their male friends or complaining about how lonely they feel when the other guy doesn't write to them. Men often shared the same bed or walked arm in arm. They frequently talked in hugely emotional terms that we would now associate with women. I once did an experiment in my class where I crossed out the names of who wrote these letters and asked students who wrote them. They all

thought teenage girls wrote them.

It was really only in the latter part of the nineteenth century that these emotional expectations changed. Until then, little boys were often dressed like girls, and “big boys” were allowed to be affectionate with each other. But in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, “sissy,” which used to be an affectionate word for little sister, suddenly became a disparaging word for men who were gentle. Women were told to stop being so affectionate with their sons. Boys were shamed for being affectionate with each other. We talk about the hate and the misogyny embedded in insults for women, but this was the period in which they invented more horrible terms for men who don’t live up to this ideal of masculinity than there are for women who don’t live up to the feminine ideals. Girls are allowed to be tomboys until they’re twelve or thirteen, and even older nowadays. Boys get hit with expectations to suck it up, don’t cry, don’t be a sissy as toddlers, before they have the reasoning skills to resent them.

Meagan Day - How were households set up before the “male breadwinner” model?

Stephanie Coontz - At all levels of society, even in the upper classes, economic subsistence depended on household production and personal and family connections. Women in the lower classes drove cows to market and were dairy makers and brewers of beer. They were active members of the economy. Upper-class women were expected to have a good head for business and to help the family cultivate valuable alliances. Neighbors traded favors and food.

But as wage labor developed, both in the upper and lower classes, work that was paid for in cash became more important than the trade and barter of goods produced at home. Men would go out to work, and so would kids of both sexes, earning cash to purchase commodities. The reason women didn’t leave the home to work is that somebody had to stay home to continue the absolutely essential labor of processing those commodities. It was not because the woman was supposed to be closeted in the home, as her natural place or role, but because flour had to be sifted by hand, fires needed tended, water had to be drawn from the well, bacon had to be cured, milk turned into cheese. And although women had to be around to nurse babies, mothering was not romanticized. Childcare was done by older kids or by neighbor girls trying to earn some money for a dowry that would help them and a future husband set up a farm or shop of their own. Only later, as the market economy got advanced enough so that women’s household labor was less essential, and many women started agitating for the same economic and political rights that men were winning, did people start justifying women’s exclusion from jobs on grounds that they were too delicate and sensitive to work outside the home, or too devoted to childcare.

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There was nothing delicate about women’s traditional work in the family economy. Their kitchens were covered with bloody haunches that they were cutting up and beer they were brewing. Their hands were rough from chopping wood and tending the fire. But gradually, as you got the development of an increasingly commodified economy where more and more things could and needed to be bought — things you couldn’t barter for — and as men began to work for wages for particular hours which could not be combined with work at home, women’s work inside the home began to be seen as secondary. So you got a sense that men’s work was what really kept the family going.

In the early days of wage labor, women tended to work outside the home when their kids were young and then withdraw from that when their kids were old enough to join the labor force — which could be as early as eight, nine, or ten — because somebody needed to be home to transform products into things the family could use. It was tremendously hard work, housework, but it made the family’s living standard better to have someone at home who could wash the clothes and prepare the food.

Meagan Day - So instead of the household functioning as a single symbiotic unit in an economy of trade and barter, making most things from whole cloth, you now have men exiting the house to work for a wage, and

then the household using the cash to buy partially processed commodities for women to then further process in the home.

This is a completely different way of running a household, and the new gendered division of labor then generates new ideas about what a man and a woman are. What new gender expectations and fantasies emerged as a consequence?

Stephanie Coontz - Money becomes very important, and money is associated with men. It becomes a matter of male pride, of class achievement for a man to be able to support a wife and for a wife to be able to organize the home in ways that made it a place for rest, not work — though of course this idea only multiplied the unpaid work of women in making the home appear restful to those who came home to it.

If the husband earned enough to afford it, or the husband and children together earned enough, then having the woman stay home to process allowed for an increase in the quality of life that seemed quite amazing. She could make the home more welcoming, put together more comfortable beds, furnish tables where you could sit and drink out of glasses instead of passing a flagon around. The whole family did better by it. So even though not everyone was able to achieve this ideal, and many women did have to work outside the home, the male breadwinner–female housewife model became the ideal among the working class.

At the same time, ironically, middle-class women who had attained this ideal and could increasingly buy finished commodities, requiring less labor to process . . . these women found themselves growing restless. They started thinking that maybe they should be allowed to pursue jobs outside the home — not working as servants in other people's homes, but getting the kinds of education that men of their class were afforded, along with opportunities to participate in society and be regarded for their individual talents.

Meagan Day - So early on in the history of industrial capitalism, we're getting a glimpse of the wife/worker paradox: if you're forced to do wage labor under unpleasant conditions, then the idea of being a housewife and having a man provide for you and want to protect you can be very alluring. But if you are living that life, and technological advancement means the production of increasingly finished commodities requiring very little at-home processing, then you start to dream of something that involves more self-actualization.

Stephanie Coontz - Yes, and this is an enduring dynamic. The trad-wife influencers today are basically peddling the same fantasy that appealed to working women in the mid-nineteenth century — the fantasy of having a man work outside the home and support you so that you can stay home and do light production work, cooking and crocheting and keeping your husband and children amused, and maybe sneaking in a little reading or other leisure activities.

Meagan Day - What's wrong with it? Why is it not something worth longing for? It sounds like it was a step up for many women.

Stephanie Coontz - Well, if you were a woman who didn't have aspirations for a career, could keep yourself amused by housework and cooking and television, and you had a father and then a husband who really appreciated what you did at home and was never abusive and never expected that you would obey him just because he was supporting you — that did seem like a step up, I suppose. But in reality, women have often found it stultifying, and many women who enjoyed it for a while came to dislike it, which is why so many middle-class women who had been homemakers decided at a certain point they couldn't bear it any longer.

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Meanwhile, if you were a woman whose husband was unfaithful, or who hit you, or who expected constant service

and bossed you around, you had no legal or social recourse. The ideology and the structure were based on an assumption that you were being protected in the home, so you had no sources of protection anywhere else. You were trapped.

Meagan Day - How did this male breadwinner–female housewife ideal ascend to its apex in the 1950s in the United States?

Stephanie Coontz - It was still aspirational for most of the nineteenth century, but many women had other aspirations as well. From the second half of the nineteenth century onward, middle-class women increasingly wanted to get jobs or an education. Meanwhile, there were still working-class women who needed jobs outside the home for survival, and they increasingly demanded better wages and working conditions. As we moved into the early twentieth century, we saw the emergence of a big feminist movement. There was also a revolution in gender and sexual mores that was every bit as challenging to many contemporaries as that of the early twenty-first century, and it spurred the emergence of a culture war that has striking parallels with the one we have been experiencing over the last couple of decades.

Then the Depression hit. For many women, that meant they weren't allowed to work, the rationale being that jobs needed to be reserved for men. When they could work, it was in very difficult circumstances. When World War II happened, however, women were called into the workforce and allowed to do jobs and learn skills they'd never had access to before. The conditions were better, the pay was better, and many women enjoyed it. Polls at the end of the war found that most of them didn't want to quit their jobs. On the other hand, many wanted to have kids, so it was easier to push them out of the labor force to make way for men returning from the war.

Meagan Day - It was easier because the ideal of the male breadwinner–female housewife family was still alive and well, ready to be activated?

Stephanie Coontz - Yes, and many decided to try it because the economic conditions were so conducive to doing it. My mother was a good example. She had worked as a shipfitter during World War II and really loved it. But when the men came home, she was fired. She resented that, but my dad was able to go to college on the GI Bill and got enough of an allowance that she had a chance to have me and stay at home to raise me. That was OK for several years, and then it started not being OK anymore. That's what happened to many, many women.

Meagan Day - Basically, economic conditions aligned to make it possible for a large group of women to give this fantasy that had been percolating since the mid-nineteenth century a go in unison. And they spent a decade or two experimenting with it before realizing it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Right?

Stephanie Coontz - Right. To be sure, I have oral histories of many women who thoroughly enjoyed the homemaker life and never regretted it. But many other women, they wanted something different for themselves — or, especially, for their daughters. Over and over again, when I interviewed women for my book *A Strange Stirring* on the impact of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, women would tell me how desperate they had felt to break free. Or their daughters would tell me that their moms had told them, "I don't want you to be a housewife just like me."

Some were desperately unhappy. I interviewed Constance Ahrons, who eventually got divorced, went back to school, and became a prominent sociologist. She described how, before that, she would stand in the kitchen washing dishes with tears running down her cheeks. She would think, "What's wrong with me? I'm so ungrateful. I have a better life than my mother had." But it felt terrible to live in an economy and culture in which there were all these new things to do and think about and not have access to them. To be completely boxed out of public life. She went to a therapist, who prescribed tranquilizers. But when she finally read *The Feminine Mystique* she said she finally realized, "The

problem is in my situation, not in me.” So she threw her tranquilizers down the toilet and eventually divorced her unsupportive husband.

When I interviewed women who had read *The Feminine Mystique*, they told me the same stories over and over, of saying, “What’s wrong with me? Why aren’t I grateful? My mother would’ve killed for a life like this.” Not all women could be homemakers, of course, but more of them could than ever before. And many of them found it intolerable for various reasons, which led to the next big wave of feminism.

Meagan Day - What about men? They were living the dream in the 1950s too. Were they enjoying it?

Stephanie Coontz - It was not a golden era. There was still plenty of racial and religious prejudice; workers were still exploited and mistreated and overworked. But the difference is the sense of progress then versus the sense of falling backward in more recent decades.

In the 1950s, people who had lived through the Depression and who had fought in World War II came out feeling really proud of their country. They had fought fascism and won, and this was a draftee army, so there was a sense of everyone making similar sacrifices. And meanwhile, the improvements to society wrought by the New Deal and the expansion of government funding, even under Republican presidents like Dwight D. Eisenhower, created new jobs, the highway program, investment in education, veterans’ benefits to send you back to school. It was an era where you could put up with discomforts because they were so much less than you and your parents previously had had to put up with. It was an upward trajectory. In that era, every generation of young men entering the labor market was making three times as much in constant dollars as his dad had at the same age. In 1960, the median price of a house in America was only a bit more than twice as much as the annual median income, compared to almost six times as much today.

So although men were working very hard in the ’50s, they felt they were being rewarded for it. If you were a male worker, your wages were rising, your purchasing power was rising, you were beginning to get pensions. You were doing it at quite a physical sacrifice. But what you told yourself is, “This is what a man does.”

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I’ve interviewed many working-class men who, if I saw them interacting at home with their daughters and wives, I might be irritated by because of the extent to which they thought of themselves as entitled because of the work they’d put in. But when I listened to them describe how proud they were of what they were able to do and how hard it was — and they couldn’t tell you how hard it was emotionally, because that’s not part of what it was to be a man anymore by that time, so they emphasized the physical — I could tell that there was something deeper at play. A sense of optimism, dignity, and just reward.

Since the mid- to late ’70s, with only a few short exceptions, there’s been a sense among many people that they’re not doing as well as the previous generation and they don’t feel secure or optimistic about the future. The rewards are not forthcoming. This is especially salient for men, for whom the ability to make money and provide for a family, and to do it better than your father before you, and to achieve this through strenuous hard work, is the masculine ideal and the path to self-respect. (And also the way to gain the respect of many women: While it may not be literally true, the incels are acknowledging a [real dynamic](#) when they say that 80 percent of the women are looking for 20 percent of the men.) And if that kind of self-respect, and respect from others, is unachievable, you either blame yourself or you blame someone else or you look for alternative ways to feel “manly,” some of which can be very antisocial.

Meagan Day - How should we relate to this battered masculine ideal? How much deference do we need to

give it if we understand that it's not natural and comes with all sorts of problems, but we also understand that men have genuinely been robbed of something valuable?

Stephanie Coontz - That's a really tough question. But as women and as people who are critics of hierarchical gender and class arrangements, we have to find ways to acknowledge the messages men have received about how to be men and the self-sacrificing or just plain helpful things they often do trying to live up to those messages, and at the same time explain that they don't have to do all the painful stuff to themselves or to others that they've been told is part of masculinity.

Going back to the polls on gender you cited, we have to be more conscious of the fact that in most societies, gender has traditionally been the first thing people see about any individual in any setting. Almost all of us are flooded from birth with expectations about how we should behave toward others and how they will behave toward us based on the gender we most closely resemble. In experiments, when people are shown a video of a baby and asked to describe its behavior, they often can't or won't describe it unless told the sex. Told it's a boy, they describe tears as anger; told it's a girl, they describe the same crying baby as scared.

By ten months old, infants associate stereotypically female faces with gender-typed objects. Seventy percent of toddlers are employing gender labels before they're two years old. One of the first things toddlers learn is how you tell a woman from a man, which one they're going to be, and what tools and clothes their sex is supposed to use. Parenting hardly matters here: My son, who has a feminist for a mom and who had a female doctor, once insisted to me that women couldn't be doctors. It's so powerful. The more they learn about what their gender is supposedly good at or bad at or likes or dislikes, the more they tend to adjust their behavior to accord with it — or in other cases, to defy or reject it because they can't or won't follow those gender instructions.

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The primacy of gender in identifying a person exists across cultures, with only minor exceptions: The Yoruba in West Africa, for example, prioritize age over gender to the extent that they will often say "I took my eldest to the store" instead of "my son" or "my daughter." But in most societies we know of, gender has been the easiest, earliest, and most universal way to classify people.

All of which is to say that we're approaching it wrongly if we don't start from understanding how salient gender is and how threatening it is to feel unable to fulfill expectations you've had of yourself and others since you were eight or nine months old. We've got to start by understanding the fear and the disorientation people feel.

On these and many other issues, the right wing understands far better than most liberals and left-wingers that there's always a good section of the population that is up for grabs, so to speak. There's a substantial middle group between the minority of Americans who support equal rights for all people and the minority who unequivocally oppose them. Challenges and worries in people's work and family lives or communities can create ambivalence or fear, insecurities that can be triggered and politically captured. We have to provide experiences and arguments that help people work through their ambivalence and not prematurely accuse them of being racist or sexist or fascist, which only makes them more likely to become that. As Loretta Ross, the former head of the National Anti-Violence Network, put it, "We've got three different kinds of allies: potential, problematic, and proven. We need to unite all of them. We've got different strategies for potential ones, problematic ones, and proven ones, but if we dismiss people because they're problematic or unproven, then we weaken our ability to make change."

The stereotypical gender roles of the modern period, which reached their height in the 1950s, continue to have a profound pull. There are reasons for that. Rather than condemn people's nostalgia, it's our job to explain that it reflects a legitimate, reality-based sense of loss, but it's based upon a misunderstanding of what caused the stability of 1950s families: first, men's legal authority over women and women's inability to make other choices, which most

people no longer agree with, and second, an economy in which one person could support a family on one wage, which is long gone.

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A lot has changed since then, and we have not always explained those changes and the solutions we want in ways that are the wisest or the most sensitive to people's doubts. This leaves an opening for the Right, and it is taking full advantage. It has constructed a conscious, very cynical alliance between the free-market proponents who want to remove all the postwar restrictions on Wall Street and the rich, and the social conservatives who want to reimpose all the postwar restrictions on gender and sexuality.

Still, while I don't want to minimize the real dangers in the resurgence of older gender prejudices and privileges, it's important to recognize that public opinion hasn't been dragged back to what it was in the 1990s, much less the 1950s. There is an alarming shift, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's mostly occurring among people who were already conservative, accelerated by the radicalization of conservatism in general. There's probably a fairly steady base of about 20 percent of people who are opposed to racial, gender, and sexual equality, 20 percent of people who are absolutely for equality in all its forms, and a huge group that toggles in between. The first group is hardening its attitudes and becoming more militant. We have to redouble our effort to reach out to the in-between group on the issues where we agree and patiently explain the issues we don't agree on but should keep discussing.

Meagan Day - Are you a gender optimist?

Stephanie Coontz - I'm certainly not a pessimist. It's worth remembering that despite the insecurity and setbacks we discussed and the failure of liberal elites to address them, although support for gender equality is lower on some measures than it was five or ten years ago, it's still higher than at any time in the 250 years before that. Same with same-sex marriage. Support was "only" [68 percent](#) in 2025, with 29 percent opposed. But in the 1990s, opposition to same-sex marriage never fell below [62 percent](#) and support didn't reach even [35 percent](#) until 1999.

Furthermore, the setbacks are not consistent across the board. The National Crime Victimization Survey, which captures more incidents than police reports, has shown a dramatic decrease in forcible [rape](#) and [sexual assault](#) since the 1970s. Rates of [domestic violence](#) have also fallen almost steadily. Partnered heterosexual men have continued to increase their contributions to the core domestic [housework](#) that men used to be derided for doing, and approval of men's greater involvement in infant and [childcare](#) continues to grow. After falling almost continuously from the early 1990s to 2014, then rising during the pandemic, [violent crime](#) and murder rates, where young men tend to be the primary offenders, plummeted in 2024 and the first half of 2025.

We also need to acknowledge and address the very mixed messages men get from many heterosexual women about what's appropriate and attractive.

So we know that we've made progress in many areas, and we have to figure out how to explain to people that we do understand their sense of loss, but they are being nostalgic for the wrong parts of the postwar era. And in doing so, we need better ways to distinguish between men who consciously adopt misogynistic and abusive practices and men who behave in ways that may be offensive to equality-oriented women but are either accepted or outright rewarded by many other women. We also need to acknowledge and address the very mixed messages men get from many heterosexual women about what's appropriate and attractive.

There are men and women who are unreachable on these questions. But for most people, I think we have a better chance of changing inegalitarian mindsets and behaviors if we can help people understand how historical conditioning and current structural constraints, not consciously evil intentions, make it hard for both men and women to act on our best impulses and identify our own blind spots or bad habits.

So it all depends on how you define optimism. I understand why people get impatient with the pace of change, and I don't deny the very real dangers inherent in these recent setbacks. But I reject the idea that there's anything inherently anti-egalitarian in men — or inherently egalitarian in women. The tremendous range of gender behaviors and values we've seen throughout history makes it clear that we have more leeway than we're often told about how to organize our gender and sexual relationships. But we also have a huge accumulation of ideas and institutions that reinforce inequality, so the kind of equality we want is not going to happen overnight. And the more we can historicize — as opposed to pathologize — the struggles we have in our personal relationships, the better chance we have of developing relationships that can support us personally as we struggle to build a more supportive society.

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Source: [Jacobin](#).

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