

# Gender Attitudes: Understanding Societal Views

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November 20, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammed looti (2025). *Gender Attitudes: Understanding Societal Views*. Psychepedia.  
Retrieved from <https://psychepedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=24911>

## Attitudes toward Gender: An Encyclopedia Entry

Attitudes toward gender constitute a fundamental area of inquiry within social psychology, sociology, and behavioral economics. These attitudes refer to the relatively enduring evaluations, beliefs, and behavioral intentions individuals hold concerning gender roles, the capabilities of different genders, and the appropriate distribution of power and resources between men, women, and non-binary individuals within a given society. These evaluations are distinct from mere **gender stereotypes**, which are descriptive beliefs about what men and women are like; instead, attitudes incorporate an evaluative component--how one feels about or what one intends to do regarding those descriptive beliefs. Understanding these attitudes is crucial because they profoundly influence social policy, interpersonal relationships, career trajectories, and the perpetuation or dismantling of systemic inequalities. They are complex constructs, often existing simultaneously on both explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) levels, reflecting deep cultural conditioning and personal experience. These attitudes are not static but evolve in response to societal shifts, educational attainment, and exposure to diverse perspectives, making their study a dynamic process reflecting ongoing cultural negotiation.

The study of gender attitudes moves beyond simple comparisons of men and women to examine the societal frameworks that prescribe and limit behavior based on perceived gender identity. A primary focus is often placed on **traditional gender roles**, which assert distinct, complementary roles for men (instrumental, breadwinner) and women (expressive, caregiver). Attitudes supporting these traditional roles often manifest as resistance to gender equality initiatives, whereas egalitarian attitudes emphasize shared responsibilities, equal opportunities, and flexible roles regardless of gender. The intensity and valence of these attitudes vary widely across cultures and demographic groups, demonstrating that they are heavily contingent upon socio-political context. Furthermore, modern approaches recognize that attitudes toward gender intersect with other dimensions of identity, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, complicating simplistic binary analyses and requiring an intersectional lens to fully grasp their complexity and impact.

It is essential to differentiate attitudes toward gender from the broader concept of sexism, though the two are closely related. Sexism represents a prejudice, typically directed against one gender (historically women), rooted in negative attitudes and beliefs about the inferiority or presumed limitations of that group. Attitudes toward gender, however, encompass a wider spectrum, including positive evaluations of traditional roles or even supportive, yet paternalistic, views known as **benevolent sexism**, which will be discussed in greater detail later. Researchers often utilize sophisticated psychological models to parse the affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of these attitudes, allowing for a detailed understanding of how deeply ingrained cultural scripts translate into observable social behavior and policy preferences. This foundational psychological work underpins contemporary efforts to measure and ultimately modify attitudes that impede social justice and equality.

## Historical and Theoretical Foundations

Early psychological theories regarding gender roles often focused on the development of 'sex-typed' behaviors, heavily influenced by psychoanalytic and social learning theories. These initial frameworks tended to view gender differences as largely innate or acquired through simple reinforcement and modeling, reflecting the prevailing societal norms of the mid-20th century which strongly favored traditional, binary roles. The focus was less on the evaluative attitudes themselves and more on the acquisition of appropriate masculine or feminine behaviors. However, as feminist critiques gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, the conceptual distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender became paramount, shifting the focus toward how societal expectations and power structures shape individual attitudes and beliefs about appropriate roles. This evolution led to more nuanced theoretical models that acknowledged the malleability and cultural specificity of gender attitudes.

A pivotal theoretical advance was the development of the **Gender Schema Theory** by Sandra Bem. This theory posits that individuals develop cognitive structures (schemas) that organize information related to gender, influencing how they perceive, interpret, and remember gender-relevant information. Attitudes toward gender are thus seen as products of these schemas; individuals whose schemas are highly polarized tend to hold more traditional and rigid attitudes, while those with more flexible, or androgynous, schemas often hold more egalitarian views. This cognitive approach provided a powerful mechanism for understanding how cultural input--from media to parental expectations--is internalized and used to form evaluative judgments about gender. Furthermore, the theory helped explain why traditional gender attitudes often persist, as people tend to selectively attend to and recall information that confirms their existing schemas, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of belief confirmation.

Perhaps the most influential contemporary framework is the Ambivalent Sexism Theory, proposed by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske. This theory posits that attitudes toward gender, particularly toward women, are not monolithic but consist of two correlated yet distinct components: **Hostile Sexism** and **Benevolent Sexism**. Hostile sexism represents overtly negative attitudes, such as the belief that women seek to control men or are inherently inferior. Conversely, benevolent sexism consists of subjectively positive, protective attitudes that nonetheless serve to subordinate women, such as the belief that women must be cherished and protected by men. Crucially, these two forms often coexist, allowing societies to maintain gender inequality through a combination of overt prejudice and seemingly chivalrous, yet paternalistic, attitudes. This framework explains why gender attitudes can appear contradictory and highlights the psychological mechanisms that make benevolent sexism particularly insidious in undermining gender equality efforts, as it often masks discrimination under the guise of affection or care.

## Components of Gender Attitudes: ABC Model

Attitudes, in general psychological terms, are often broken down into the tripartite ABC model: Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive components. This framework is highly useful for analyzing the complexity of attitudes toward gender. The **Cognitive component** refers to the beliefs, thoughts, and knowledge structures an individual holds regarding gender roles and differences. This includes generalized beliefs (stereotypes) about the capabilities of men versus women in domains like leadership, emotional expression, or technical skills. For example, the belief that "men are naturally better at mathematics" is a cognitive component of a gender attitude. These cognitive structures provide the rationalizations necessary to support the other components of the attitude and are heavily influenced by cultural narratives and institutional practices.

The **Affective component** relates to the feelings or emotions associated with gender roles or specific gender groups. This can range from admiration for a woman who successfully balances career and family (a positive affect toward a specific gender role performance) to feelings of discomfort or annoyance when an individual violates perceived gender norms (e.g., a man showing excessive vulnerability). The affective component is often the most resistant to logical argumentation because it is rooted in emotional responses rather than factual knowledge. In the context of sexism, the affective component manifests as feelings of anger, contempt, or dislike (hostile affect) or feelings of warmth, idealization, and dependency (benevolent affect). These emotional reactions are powerful drivers of discriminatory behavior, often preceding conscious cognitive processing.

Finally, the **Behavioral component** encompasses the actions, intentions, and behavioral tendencies stemming from the cognitive and affective components. This component includes a person's willingness to vote for a female political candidate, their tendency to interrupt women in meetings, or their choices regarding the division of labor within their own household. While an individual may hold egalitarian cognitive beliefs, their behavior might still reflect traditional attitudes, especially under conditions of stress or time pressure--a phenomenon often observed in studies examining implicit bias. The relationship between attitude and behavior is complex, moderated by factors such as social norms, perceived control, and the strength of the attitude itself. Measuring actual behavior, rather than just stated intentions, is critical for fully assessing the impact of gender attitudes on real-world outcomes.

## Measurement and Assessment of Gender Attitudes

The measurement of attitudes toward gender presents unique methodological challenges, primarily due to the social desirability bias--the tendency of respondents to report beliefs that align with perceived societal norms, particularly egalitarianism, even if their private attitudes differ. Researchers have developed sophisticated methods to capture both explicit (conscious) and

implicit (unconscious) attitudes. **Explicit measures** traditionally rely on self-report surveys and scales, such as the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (ATWS) or the Modern Sexism Scale, which ask respondents directly about their beliefs regarding gender roles, equality, and women's rights. While these scales are useful for tracking changes in stated public opinion over time, they are highly susceptible to conscious editing by the respondent.

To bypass the limitations of explicit measures, researchers increasingly rely on **implicit measures**, which assess automatic, non-conscious associations between gender categories and evaluative attributes (e.g., good/bad, career/family). The most prominent implicit measure is the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The Gender-Career IAT, for instance, measures the strength of the association between the category "Female" and concepts related to "Family" versus "Career." A faster response time when pairing "Female" with "Family" suggests a stronger implicit traditional attitude. Implicit measures often reveal that individuals who explicitly endorse egalitarianism still harbor traditional or biased automatic associations, providing crucial insight into the persistence of subtle discrimination in areas like hiring or mentoring.

Further refinements in measurement include the use of projective techniques, observation of non-verbal cues, and physiological measures (e.g., galvanic skin response, facial EMG) in response to gender-stereotypical stimuli, although these methods are less commonly used for large-scale assessments. The integration of explicit and implicit data is vital, as research suggests that explicit attitudes are often better predictors of deliberate, public behaviors (like voting), while implicit attitudes are often better predictors of spontaneous, non-verbal behaviors and decisions made under cognitive load (like microaggressions or snap hiring judgments). Valid assessment requires triangulating data from multiple sources to capture the full spectrum of an individual's attitude system, acknowledging the multi-layered nature of gender bias.

## Influences on Gender Attitude Formation

The formation of attitudes toward gender is a complex, lifelong process heavily influenced by multiple interacting socialization agents. The earliest and perhaps most potent influence comes from the **family unit**. Parents and primary caregivers transmit gender attitudes not only through explicit teaching (e.g., telling a child what toys are appropriate) but also through modeling the division of labor, emotional expression, and power dynamics within the home. Children internalize these observed dynamics, often reproducing traditional attitudes if they see highly segregated roles. Furthermore, parental reactions to a child's gender-atypical behavior serve as powerful reinforcement mechanisms, shaping early cognitive schemas about appropriate conduct.

Beyond the family, **media and popular culture** play an overwhelmingly significant role in shaping gender attitudes by providing pervasive, often stereotypical, representations of men and women. Television, film, advertising, and digital media frequently perpetuate traditional gender roles,

portraying women as primarily focused on appearance or domesticity, and men as dominant, emotionally restricted, and focused on achievement. Even when media attempts to portray egalitarianism, subtle biases often persist, reinforcing the idea that certain characteristics are intrinsically linked to gender. Exposure to counter-stereotypical representations, however, has been shown to be an effective tool in weakening traditional attitudes, particularly when those representations are diverse and complex.

The **educational system and peer groups** also serve as powerful socialization contexts. Textbooks, curriculum choices, and teacher interactions often subtly reinforce gender biases, for instance, by disproportionately highlighting the achievements of men in certain fields. As children enter adolescence, peer groups become increasingly influential; the desire for social acceptance often drives conformity to gender norms, reinforcing attitudes that support those norms. Finally, **cultural and institutional contexts**--including religious organizations, legal frameworks, and political ideologies--provide the overarching narrative that legitimizes certain gender attitudes. Societies with high levels of economic inequality or rigid religious structures tend to foster and maintain more traditional gender attitudes, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between individual belief systems and macro-level cultural norms.

## Consequences of Traditional and Egalitarian Gender Attitudes

The consequences of holding traditional versus egalitarian attitudes toward gender are far-reaching, impacting individual psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, and societal structures. Traditional attitudes, characterized by rigid adherence to prescribed roles, often lead to significant limitations on individual choice and potential. For individuals whose inherent abilities or desires clash with prescribed roles (e.g., a woman aspiring to a traditionally male-dominated career or a man wishing to be a stay-at-home parent), traditional attitudes can result in **internal conflict, reduced self-efficacy, and increased psychological distress**. Societally, traditional attitudes contribute directly to the maintenance of the gender wage gap, occupational segregation, and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions by promoting the belief that certain roles are inherently unsuitable for one gender.

In the realm of interpersonal relationships, attitudes toward gender dictate expectations regarding domestic labor, emotional support, and decision-making power. Couples holding traditional attitudes often exhibit unequal distributions of household chores and childcare, placing a disproportionate burden on women, which can lead to marital dissatisfaction and stress. Conversely, **egalitarian attitudes** promote more balanced relationships characterized by shared responsibility, greater communication, and mutual respect for individual autonomy, leading to higher reported relationship quality. However, even in egalitarian contexts, implicit traditional attitudes can surface, particularly during times of transition (e.g., the birth of a child), often leading to a regression toward traditional divisions of labor, highlighting the enduring power of internalized

norms.

At the macro level, gender attitudes significantly influence **political behavior and public policy**. Traditional attitudes are strongly correlated with resistance to policies promoting reproductive rights, affirmative action, and protections for LGBTQ+ individuals. They often translate into voting patterns that favor candidates who uphold the existing social hierarchy. Egalitarian attitudes, conversely, drive support for policies aimed at achieving gender equity, such as paid parental leave, equal pay legislation, and increased representation in government. The cumulative effect of widespread traditional gender attitudes is the perpetuation of systemic barriers that restrict economic mobility and social justice, making the shift toward egalitarianism a crucial component of broader societal progress.

### Changing Gender Attitudes: Interventions and Future Directions

Given the pervasive influence of gender attitudes, a significant area of psychological research is dedicated to developing effective interventions aimed at promoting egalitarianism and reducing hostile and benevolent sexism. Educational interventions are foundational, focusing on critical media literacy, challenging stereotypes in curriculum, and promoting awareness of implicit bias. **Perspective-taking exercises**, where individuals are encouraged to imagine life from the perspective of someone facing gender discrimination, have proven effective in increasing empathy and reducing prejudiced attitudes. Furthermore, direct, factual education about the societal costs of gender inequality helps challenge the cognitive components of traditional attitudes by providing counter-evidence to existing schemas.

Another critical approach is the application of the **Contact Hypothesis**, which suggests that positive, sustained interactions between individuals of different groups can reduce prejudice. In the context of gender, this means creating environments--such as integrated workplaces or gender-neutral parenting groups--where men and women collaborate on equal footing, thereby undermining the belief that certain tasks or roles are inherently gendered. For this approach to be successful, the contact must occur under conditions of equal status and shared goals, minimizing the possibility of reinforcing existing hierarchical attitudes. Effective interventions often target the behavioral component first, encouraging individuals to act in non-traditional ways, which can then lead to subsequent changes in affective and cognitive evaluations.

Future research directions emphasize the need for longitudinal studies tracking attitude change across generations, especially in response to digital media and globalization. There is a growing focus on **intersectionality**, examining how attitudes toward gender vary based on the intersection of gender identity with other marginalized identities, requiring more targeted, culturally sensitive interventions. Furthermore, psychological science must continue to refine methods for measuring implicit attitudes and developing techniques to mitigate their influence on high-stakes decisions.

Ultimately, the goal is not merely to change survey responses but to foster genuine, internalized egalitarian attitudes that translate into equitable social structures and improved well-being for all individuals, regardless of their gender identity.

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