

Women in the Workforce: Attitudes & Trends

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Historical Context and Early Frameworks

The study of **attitudes toward women working outside the home** represents a critical intersection of social psychology, sociology, and gender studies. Historically, the prevailing societal structure, particularly in Western industrial nations, was defined by a strict adherence to traditional gender roles: men occupied the public sphere of work and commerce, while women were relegated to the private sphere of home and family maintenance. This division, often termed the doctrine of **separate spheres**, laid the foundational ideological groundwork for opposition to female employment. Early attitudes were deeply intertwined with economic necessity; women primarily entered the workforce en masse during periods of war or significant economic upheaval, often being expected to return to domestic duties once the crisis subsided. The resistance observed during the early to mid-20th century was not merely economic but fundamentally rooted in preserving what was perceived as the natural order of the family unit, positioning female employment as a threat to societal stability and male dominance. Understanding these early frameworks requires acknowledging the pervasive influence of religious doctrine, legal statutes, and cultural narratives that reinforced the intrinsic value of female domesticity over public contribution.

The mid-20th century saw the beginnings of systematic psychological inquiry into these attitudes. Researchers initially focused on identifying demographic predictors of acceptance or rejection. Early findings consistently showed that attitudes were highly correlated with educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and age, with younger, more educated individuals exhibiting greater acceptance. Crucially, these early analyses highlighted the concept of **perceived conflict**: much of the negative attitude stemmed from the belief that employment inevitably led to the neglect of children and marital dissatisfaction. This perception created a powerful barrier, suggesting that a woman could not simultaneously fulfill the roles of a competent worker and a devoted mother and wife. These studies often utilized rudimentary scaling techniques, generally measuring acceptance along a single continuum ranging from entirely traditional to fully egalitarian views regarding gender roles and labor distribution, providing initial quantitative data on deeply held cultural beliefs.

Furthermore, the development of modern feminism and the second-wave women's movement provided a powerful counter-narrative to the traditional frameworks. As more women entered higher education and the labor market post-1960s, the dissonance between traditional attitudes and lived experience grew significantly. Psychological research began to shift from merely documenting existing attitudes to exploring the underlying psychological mechanisms that maintain gender inequality, such as ambivalent sexism and system justification theory. This transition marked a move toward recognizing attitudes toward working women not as isolated opinions but as integral components of broader ideological structures concerning power, equity, and resource allocation within society. This period established the necessity of analyzing these attitudes within a

dynamic, changing sociocultural landscape rather than a static historical context, viewing them as reflections of perceived threats to gendered hierarchies.

Theoretical Models Explaining Attitude Formation

Several robust theoretical models have been employed to explain the formation and maintenance of attitudes toward female employment. **Social Role Theory**, perhaps the most influential, posits that individuals internalize societal expectations associated with different roles, such as mother, manager, or wife. When women occupy roles traditionally designated for men, this creates a cognitive mismatch, leading to negative stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes, often manifesting as hostility toward career-oriented women. The theory suggests that attitudes are maintained because observing women in domestic roles reinforces the belief that these roles are natural or inherent, thus perpetuating the cycle of gender segregation in the workforce and sustaining opposition to women who deviate from these prescribed paths. Attitudes are therefore functional, serving to maintain the status quo of gendered social roles by punishing role transgression.

Another critical framework is **System Justification Theory (SJT)**. SJT argues that people are motivated, often unconsciously, to defend and rationalize the existing social, economic, and political systems, even if those systems disadvantage their own group or others. In the context of working women, negative attitudes can be seen as a mechanism for justifying the current arrangement where men disproportionately hold positions of power and higher wages. By believing that women belong at home or are less competent in the workplace, individuals justify the unequal distribution of resources and status, thereby minimizing perceived social conflict. This mechanism is particularly potent when the social system is perceived as stable or threatened, leading individuals to reinforce traditional attitudes to reduce cognitive uncertainty and maintain societal harmony, often at the expense of promoting gender equity.

Furthermore, the **Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI)** approach highlights that attitudes are often not uniformly negative but can be multifaceted, involving both hostile and benevolent components. **Hostile sexism** reflects overt negativity, antipathy, and derogatory views toward women who challenge male authority or traditional roles, such as viewing working women as overly aggressive or selfish. Conversely, **benevolent sexism**, while seemingly positive, involves subjectively favorable attitudes toward women who fulfill traditional roles, such as believing women must be protected and cherished because they are delicate or pure. Both forms, however, function synergistically to maintain gender inequality. A man who holds benevolent attitudes may strongly oppose his wife working because he believes she needs protection from the harsh realities of the workplace, thereby restricting her autonomy and participation in the public sphere, illustrating the complex and often subtle nature of restrictive attitudes.

Historical Shifts in Attitudes and Measurement

Attitudes toward women working outside the home have undergone dramatic shifts since the mid-20th century, largely tracking major socioeconomic and cultural transformations. Data collected consistently across decades, particularly in Western nations, reveal a strong linear trend toward greater acceptance and egalitarianism. For instance, surveys tracking responses to statements such as "A wife should not work if her husband can support her" showed profound declines in agreement from the 1970s through the 2000s, reflecting a societal normalization of female employment. This shift is attributable not only to the success of feminist movements but also to the increased economic necessity for dual-income households, which normalized female employment across all socioeconomic strata. The sheer visibility of working women in diverse professions gradually eroded the cognitive dissonance associated with role deviance, making female employment a social fact rather than a contested ideological position, though specific pockets of resistance persist.

The methodological sophistication used to measure these attitudes has also evolved significantly. Early measures often relied on simple, dichotomous questions focusing solely on whether a woman should work, which failed to capture the contextual nature of resistance. Modern scales, however, acknowledge the complexity and context-dependency of these beliefs. Contemporary instruments often utilize multi-dimensional scales designed to capture nuances, such as whether the attitude changes based on the woman's marital status, whether she has young children, or the type of job she holds, recognizing that acceptance is often conditional. Key instruments, like the **Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS)** or the **Gender Role Attitudes Scale**, allow researchers to parse out general egalitarianism from specific resistance related to maternal employment, providing a much richer understanding of the underlying constraints people place on women's workforce participation.

Despite the overall trend toward acceptance, research consistently identifies a persistent gap concerning attitudes toward mothers of very young children working full-time. While general acceptance of female employment is high, resistance remains strongest when employment is perceived to directly conflict with intensive mothering ideologies, suggesting that gender equality is accepted primarily when it does not interfere with traditional childcare expectations. This specific resistance suggests that while the boundary between the public and private spheres has blurred for women generally, the expectation of female primary childcare responsibility remains deeply entrenched. Therefore, shifts in attitudes are often conditional, demonstrating that society has largely accepted women working, provided that this work does not fundamentally challenge the traditional allocation of domestic and childcare duties, illustrating a phenomenon often termed the "**stalled revolution**" in gender equality.

Sociocultural and Demographic Influences

Attitudes are profoundly shaped by the sociocultural environment and an individual's demographic characteristics. **Education** consistently emerges as one of the strongest predictors of egalitarian attitudes; higher levels of education are associated with exposure to diverse perspectives, critical thinking skills, and environments, such as universities, that often promote gender equity. Similarly, individuals residing in urbanized areas, which tend to be more diverse and economically varied, generally hold more progressive views compared to those in rural or traditionally conservative communities. Furthermore, exposure to media representations of successful working women and engagement with diverse social networks contribute significantly to attitude liberalization by providing counter-stereotypical examples of female competence and commitment.

Religious affiliation and political ideology also play a crucial role in shaping these attitudes. Individuals identifying with highly conservative religious denominations often hold more traditional views regarding gender roles and are more likely to oppose women's full integration into the workforce, citing theological interpretations that prioritize female domesticity and subordination within the family structure. Politically, conservative ideologies tend to emphasize traditional family structures and limited governmental intervention in social norms, leading to stronger opposition to policies supporting working mothers, such as subsidized childcare or affirmative action. Conversely, politically liberal individuals are far more likely to endorse policies and attitudes that support gender equity and shared family responsibilities, recognizing the structural barriers facing working women.

Age and generational cohort effects also influence attitudes substantially. While age generally correlates with more traditional views, as older generations were socialized during periods of stricter role adherence, longitudinal studies demonstrate that even older cohorts have experienced attitude liberalization over time, suggesting widespread social change rather than just cohort replacement. However, the gap remains significant, with Millennials and Generation Z displaying levels of support for working women that were unimaginable to the generations preceding them. This generational shift reflects a normalization of the dual-earner model and changing expectations regarding male participation in domestic labor, which alleviates some of the perceived role conflict that drove previous negative attitudes and fosters greater acceptance of female professional ambition.

Psychological Determinants of Resistance

Beyond demographic and sociological factors, several psychological mechanisms explain why resistance to women working persists, even in highly developed nations. One key factor is **Masculine Gender Role Stress (MGRS)**. For men whose identity is strongly tied to their role as the primary financial provider, the entrance of women into the workforce, especially into high-status

jobs, can be perceived as an existential threat to their masculinity and status. This stress can manifest as heightened opposition to female employment, serving as a defense mechanism to protect their self-esteem and perceived societal value. The resulting attitudes often express themselves as resentment toward women who are perceived as encroaching on male professional territory or devaluing the traditional male breadwinner role, thereby reinforcing occupational segregation.

Another powerful determinant is **Aversive Sexism**. Unlike hostile sexism, aversive sexism involves individuals who consciously endorse egalitarian principles but harbor unconscious negative feelings toward women, particularly those in non-traditional roles. These individuals may express verbal support for working women in abstract terms but subtly discriminate or hold negative attitudes when confronted with specific situations, such as hiring a female manager or accepting a female colleague's authority. This subtle bias maintains systemic barriers and often manifests in the form of microaggressions or biased performance evaluations, demonstrating that the psychological barriers to full acceptance are often implicit and deeply ingrained, making them harder to identify and combat than overt hostility.

Furthermore, attitudes are strongly influenced by **Personal Experience and Social Learning**. Individuals who grew up with working mothers, or who currently have spouses or partners who work, generally exhibit significantly more positive attitudes because they have lived experience that contradicts traditional stereotypes. Direct observation of a successful working woman who also manages family life effectively reduces the perceived conflict between work and family roles. Conversely, individuals whose social circle or family structure strictly adhered to traditional gender roles often lack the experiential data necessary to challenge those schemas, leading them to maintain restrictive attitudes based on historical precedent or idealized notions of family structure. This highlights the importance of social modeling and exposure to diverse realities in shaping psychological acceptance.

Impact on Policy, Family Dynamics, and Workplace Culture

Attitudes toward women working outside the home have profound real-world consequences, shaping public policy, influencing internal family dynamics, and defining workplace culture. Negative attitudes, particularly those related to maternal employment, often translate into a lack of robust public support for essential infrastructure like affordable, high-quality childcare and paid parental leave. Societies where traditional views persist tend to have weaker family support policies, placing the burden of balancing work and family squarely on the working woman. This policy vacuum reinforces the perception that female employment is inherently problematic or unsustainable without significant personal sacrifice, thereby validating the traditionalist viewpoint and creating structural barriers to equity.

Within the family unit, attitudes dictate the distribution of labor. Egalitarian attitudes within a couple are strongly correlated with more equitable sharing of domestic chores and childcare responsibilities, leading to greater marital satisfaction and stability. Conversely, if one or both partners hold traditional views, the working woman often experiences the "**second shift**"--performing a full day's work outside the home followed by the majority of domestic duties. This unequal burden is a primary source of stress and burnout for working women and acts as a hidden cost of traditional attitudes, often leading women to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce entirely, thereby confirming the traditionalist belief that women cannot handle both roles simultaneously and perpetuating the cycle of inequality.

In the workplace, prevailing attitudes influence hiring, promotion, and evaluation processes. Negative stereotypes--such as the belief that mothers are less committed or that women are less competent in leadership roles--contribute significantly to the **glass ceiling** effect and the gender pay gap. When employers or colleagues hold traditional attitudes, women often face harsher performance evaluations, fewer opportunities for advancement, and a greater necessity to prove their commitment and competence simultaneously. Research shows that women who are highly competent are sometimes penalized for being perceived as less warm or nurturing, a phenomenon known as the "**double bind**," demonstrating how deeply ingrained psychological attitudes impede professional equity regardless of individual merit or qualifications.

Cross-Cultural Variations and Future Directions

While the overall global trend leans toward increasing acceptance of female employment, significant **cross-cultural variations** exist, primarily driven by differences in economic development, dominant religious frameworks, and historical political systems. For instance, Scandinavian countries, characterized by strong social democratic policies, high levels of gender equality legislation, and robust state-supported childcare, exhibit the highest levels of egalitarian attitudes, where female workforce participation is viewed as a national economic asset. In contrast, many nations in the Middle East, South Asia, and parts of Latin America, where patriarchal structures and traditional religious interpretations remain dominant, show significantly stronger resistance to female workforce participation, especially in high-status professional roles, highlighting the powerful role of institutional structures in shaping individual beliefs.

Research indicates that economic necessity often overrides cultural resistance. In rapidly developing nations, economic pressures frequently force women into the labor market regardless of prevailing attitudes, leading to a cultural lag where high female participation coexists with deeply traditional beliefs about gender roles. This juxtaposition creates significant cognitive tension and social conflict. Future research must focus not just on measuring acceptance, but on understanding how societies manage this dissonance--for example, through the creation of new, more flexible gender ideologies that allow for both working and mothering roles without the intense

guilt often imposed by traditional norms. Comparative studies are essential for isolating the variables that accelerate or impede attitude change.

Looking forward, the study of attitudes toward women working outside the home must increasingly incorporate the influence of digital technology and globalization. The rise of remote work and the gig economy challenges traditional definitions of the "workplace," potentially reducing the perceived conflict between work and family for women, which could further liberalize attitudes across different cultures. Future research should also explore the role of social media in disseminating both egalitarian and anti-feminist ideologies, recognizing that the battle for attitude change is now being fought on digital platforms. Ultimately, achieving full gender equity requires not just the acceptance of women working, but the fundamental restructuring of attitudes regarding who is responsible for domestic life and the psychological devaluation of traditionally female labor, moving beyond mere tolerance toward genuine ideological equality.