

# Conflict Over Gender Role Changes

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how conflict can arise due to the changes that have occurred in gender roles over time. The particular areas of focus include:

1. Shifts in Gender Roles
2. Comfort Zone and Cognitive Dissonance

## 1. Shifts in Gender Roles

Over the last several lessons, we've been talking about gender and how cultures view certain behaviors and traits as appropriate for men or for women.

**Gender roles**, or what is considered proper, correct, or right for each gender, do change, and we can see those changes both here in the United States and globally.

These roles are not static; they evolve over time, just like any cultural worldview. However **gender role change** is neither instantaneous nor evenly felt.

A gender role change, such as women moving into what have been considered traditionally male roles, occurs over time.

### IN CONTEXT

There was a huge shift in the United States with the rise of the Women's Movement. Before this shift, the traditional roles that were considered appropriate for women were jobs such as teacher, nurse, or secretary.

When the Women's Movement began, some women who were nurses decided to become doctors. Women who were secretaries realized they might be able to move into a leadership position somebody. There were also women looking outside the realm of professional, white collar jobs, and trying to get blue collar jobs. Women were applying to climb utility poles, do construction work, and take other jobs in what were considered traditionally male fields, like engineering.

When this gender role change happened, it caused a lot of discomfort because the shift was asking people to move out of the comfort of what they knew.

Because this was more difficult for some people than others, the shift in gender roles was not evenly felt.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Gender Roles

Roles considered “right, correct, or proper” for a given gender by a culture.

##### Gender Role Change

Changes in gender roles (such as growth of acceptance of women performing traditionally "male" roles) within a given culture.

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## 2. Comfort Zone and Cognitive Dissonance

When someone who has accepted this change interacts with someone who hasn't, there can be conflict.

This conflict is ultimately the result of the fact that these changes ask people to move out of their **comfort zone**, or the feelings that they have become accustomed to.

There were also a lot of perceptions about what would happen if women moved into these roles, such as that men would feel the loss of power and privileges.

Many women felt that it was inappropriate to be moving into the work world and leaving the domestic sphere. This move challenged established beliefs that caused both men and women to feel anxiety and ultimately **cognitive dissonance**, or the state of holding two inconsistent beliefs at the same time.

How that cognitive dissonance was handled by each individual who experienced it influenced how that person approached the overall conflict of the gender role change.

Whether or not people were able to integrate this new shift into their beliefs really had a lot to do with how individuals, as well as society, resolved the conflict. Some of them took legal action; we now have laws passed that prohibit discrimination based on gender.

For others, acceptance just took time. Eventually, it was seen as more acceptable for women to hold managerial roles. Today, there are many women going into the medical field to become doctors, and others are doing construction work. Neither is the jarring sight that it was at one point.

However, there are still challenges. Women still earn less than men on average for equivalent roles, and women of color earn dramatically less than either white women or men of color. We've also recently seen women accepted into more military and combat roles, and there's still a lot of cognitive dissonance surrounding this decision, especially regarding a military culture that can be aggressive towards women.

As changes continue to occur and roles continue to evolve, it's easy to forget how it was less than a century ago that much of this change began.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Comfort Zone

The range of situations and/or feelings to which a person is accustomed.

##### Cognitive Dissonance

A state in which the mind holds two or more incompatible thoughts or beliefs.



## BIG IDEA

Although changes in gender roles happen, they're slow and evolve over time. When these changes occur, they're not evenly felt; they can and do lead to conflicts. How people resolve their own personal cognitive dissonance with what they see happening around them really influences how they will deal with the conflict.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **shifts in gender roles** do occur, but they take place over an extended period of time, and they are not felt evenly across an entire culture. You now understand that because these changes to the **comfort zone** are **experienced differently by different people**, **this can lead to cognitive dissonance**, or the state of holding two opposing beliefs at the same time, and ultimately conflict. How people in a society respond to and resolve this conflict will depend on how they resolve their own cognitive dissonance. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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