

# Gender Roles and Sexism

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of gender roles, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Gender Roles
2. Matriarchy and Patriarchy
3. Sexism
4. Intersectionality

## 1. GENDER ROLES

**Gender roles** are the associated behaviors, roles, expectations, etc., associated with being a man or a woman in society. There's nothing innately natural about what women do and what men do--as you grow up, you learn how men and women are supposed to act in our society. You learn the gender roles through socialization, then adopt them and internalize them yourself. You develop a picture of how males and females are supposed to act, and adjust your behavior accordingly.

These gender roles, as mentioned, are socially constructed. Each society constructs its own notion of gender roles, and as members of that society, people internalize and adapt them.

### IN CONTEXT

The social construction of gender and gender roles has not been constant through time. In fact, it varies over history. What women can do now in our society wasn't possible 150 years ago. For instance, they weren't able to vote. They also weren't working out in the public space--only men were doing that. Thus, conventions of gender and gender roles change through time.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Gender Roles

Expectations for behavior based on one's gender status (male or female).

## 2. MATRIARCHY AND PATRIARCHY

Just as gender roles change through time, they also vary from society to society. For instance, what it means to be a man and woman--the gender roles associated with those meanings--in Pakistan is not the same as what it means in the United States today.

Given constructions of gender socially, people organize power in society accordingly, along different gender lines. In the process, they establish matriarchy or patriarchy.

- **Matriarchy** denotes rule by female, or a female-dominant society; it is maternal.
- **Patriarchy**, on the other hand, is the opposite, meaning males are dominant and more powerful in society, stemming from the word "pater."



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Matriarchy**

A form of social organization where women have power and control and hold the dominant positions in social life.

##### **Patriarchy**

A form of social organization in which males hold the dominant positions in society and in the household, holding authority over wives and daughters.

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## 3. SEXISM

Throughout history, patriarchal societies have been more common, with matriarchy being far more rare. The abundance of patriarchal societies and the persistence of patriarchy in society helps to explain the existence of sexism.

**Sexism** is an ideology that holds that one sex, usually males, is inherently better than another. Sexism has social consequences, especially when it becomes institutionalized.

#### IN CONTEXT

Women typically earn less money than men, and they're culturally dissuaded from pursuing better paying, more male-dominated careers, because of sexist attitudes.

Currently, this state of affairs is changing--women are starting to fill out occupations that were typically male. This is somewhat mitigated through the passage of time and through gender equality, yet you still see sexism in society and continue to live in a patriarchal society.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Sexism**

The view that one sex is better than the other.

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## 4. INTERSECTIONALITY

In the same way that society constructs categories of gender, it also constructs meanings to other categories, like race, class, age, and sexual orientation. **Intersectionality** is a sociological theory that holds that multiple forms of disadvantage--or conversely, advantage--converge together to form an interlocking system of disadvantage (or advantage) for certain people or groups in society. Various identity categories combine or intersect into interlocking systems of advantage or disadvantage.

Being a very sociological idea, this idea provides a way to think about how different intersections of socially-constructed identity such as gender, race, class, and age combine and converge to structure a set of advantages or disadvantages in society, which in turn converge and structure people's life chances. Intersectionality helps in understanding the connections between gender and other social identities in society.



#### BRAINSTORM

Suppose you are a 27-year-old black female living in the inner city in a poor neighborhood, a member of a lower class. How do all of these factors combine to produce advantage or disadvantage? What happens if you change one variable--for instance, suppose you are a 27-year-old black female who is extremely wealthy, in an upper class? How does the intersection of these categories lead to advantage or disadvantage in society?

Intersection is a kind of sociological 'buzzword.' It's very common for sociologists to profess studying, for example, the intersection of environmental politics and class, or the intersection of race and gender.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Intersectionality

A theory that multiple forms of oppression (e.g. race, gender, age, sexuality, disability) combine to create overlapping experiences of discrimination.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about gender in the social construction of **gender roles**, as well as **matriarchy and patriarchy, sexism and intersectionality**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Gender Roles

Expectations for behavior based on one's gender status (male or female).

##### Intersectionality

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##### Matriarchy

A form of social organization where women have power and control and hold the dominant positions in social life.

**Patriarchy**

A form of social organization in which males hold the dominant positions in society and in the household, holding authority over wives and daughters.

**Sexism**

The view that one sex is better than the other.