



# Breaking Out of a Gendered Box

Centering What's Most Human When Writing About Work, Family, and Care

By Vicki Shabo

The American public's views on gender are complex and often internally inconsistent, and they vary by demographics, life experience, and ideology. However, most people, regardless of their gender or views on the topic, are bound by a desire to protect and support themselves and their loved ones financially, physically, and emotionally. For the most part, people living in the United States understand this as a shared value.

In this issue primer, we share current statistics on how people in the U.S. perceive, experience, and discuss the impact of gender roles in work, family, and care contexts. We present current data on disparities in labor force participation, wages, and care—and offer ways to acknowledge shared struggles rather than reinforce zero-sum mindsets around gender. We also offer suggestions for storytellers interested in leaning into audiences' demonstrated desire for stories that depict characters of all genders managing work and care, navigating conflicts, and finding solutions.

Our hope is that more nuanced and authentic media representation will help people and communities find common ground around realities, hardships, and joys that are human. Over time, more intentional and human-centered storytelling can help break down gender-related systemic barriers, implicit biases, and cultural expectations and lay the groundwork for advances in gender equity.

Read online: [newamerica.org/entertainment/genderroles](https://newamerica.org/entertainment/genderroles)

## THE PROBLEM

**Most Americans believe in gender equality as a value, but zero-sum fears divide us.**

Women and men have different life experiences and face different challenges, but **zero-sum thinking about gender roles—and language that overstates differences**—harms nearly everyone.

Assuming men and women are necessarily different in the realms of work, home, and community is a key barrier to equity. Language and depictions suggesting that “men’s” and “women’s” roles are inherently distinguishable:

- Can be at odds with how most people move through their daily lives;
- Perpetuate unhelpful thinking about one group’s success coming at another’s expense;
- Contradict growing openness to people of all genders engaging in a range of work, family, and caregiving tasks; and
- Reinforce implicit and explicit pressures to “live up to” outdated gendered ideals and perceived societal expectations.

## A RESPONSE

**Focus on what connects us as humans.**

**Acknowledge the realities of different lived experiences, barriers, opportunities, and cultural expectations** while showing people as multidimensional human beings at home, at work, and in their communities, regardless of their gender.

Storytellers can:

- Surface and interrogate outdated stereotypes without dismissing or glorifying characters who may prefer traditional gender roles;
- Embrace honest dialogue about what works and what doesn’t for all people who are managing work and family care;
- Highlight how the lack of systemic work, family, and care supports contributes to frustration for people of all genders;
- Avoid tropes that pit women and men against each other in ways that reinforce gender essentialism or slot people into particular roles based on their gender;
- Embed nuanced representation of people holding jobs and caring for loved ones in ways that are not gendered; and
- Allow characters to express complex emotions and work together competently to manage the hardships, joys, humor, and sorrows in their lives.



# Fast Facts on U.S. Views of Gender Equality

**People value gender equality and recognize deficiencies.**

- Most adults in the U.S. say that achieving equality between women and men is important to them personally, including 70 percent of women and 55 percent of men.<sup>1</sup>
- Two-thirds of U.S. adults say unequal legal rights, different societal expectations, and the lack of women in positions of power are major obstacles to equality. Forty-three percent say family responsibilities are a major obstacle.<sup>2</sup>
  - Higher shares of women than men perceive each of these realities to be a major obstacle.
  - More Democrats than Republicans perceive rights, expectations, and power differentials to be obstacles to equality, but nearly equal shares agree that family responsibilities are an obstacle.
- Among those who think the U.S. currently falls short on gender equality, half say that more equal workplaces (53 percent of responses overall), including equal pay (45 percent) and an end to discrimination (19 percent), would be indicators of progress.<sup>3</sup>

**However, many people express zero-sum concerns that gender equality efforts help women but hurt men.**

- More than 80 percent of U.S. adults agree that increased opportunities for women have improved quality of life in the U.S., yet more than one-third (37 percent) also agree that when women demand equality, they are actually seeking special favors.
  - Men (50 percent) and younger people (44 percent) are especially likely to see women's demands for equality as seeking special favors.<sup>4</sup>
- Fifty-seven percent of U.S. adults say changing gender roles have made it easier for women to be successful at work and to have satisfying lives, while only about four in 10 believe the same is true of men.<sup>5</sup>
- Forty percent of U.S. adults—and nearly half of men (48 percent)—say that men are expected to do too much to support equality. Similarly, 39 percent of U.S. adults—and 47 percent of men—believe that women's equality has resulted in discrimination against men.<sup>6</sup>
- In 2024, 38 percent of Americans agreed that “when it comes to giving women equal rights with men, things have gone far enough in my country”—an increase from 33 percent in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

## Storytelling Tips to Overcome Zero-Sum Thinking

Show the value of equality for everyone, in contexts such as:

- Happier parents who work together to navigate conflicting or competing work and caregiving needs;
- Better workplace collaborations that result in benefits for workers and companies;
- Higher wages in workplaces where people join forces to demand higher pay; and
- More cultural acceptance of men showing emotion and providing care for children and loved ones.



# Data Dive: Gender Disparities in Work, Wages, and Care

Women experience labor force participation and economic disparities, but focusing on barriers to women’s equality doesn’t need to diminish the hardships facing men and all people.

## Labor Force Participation

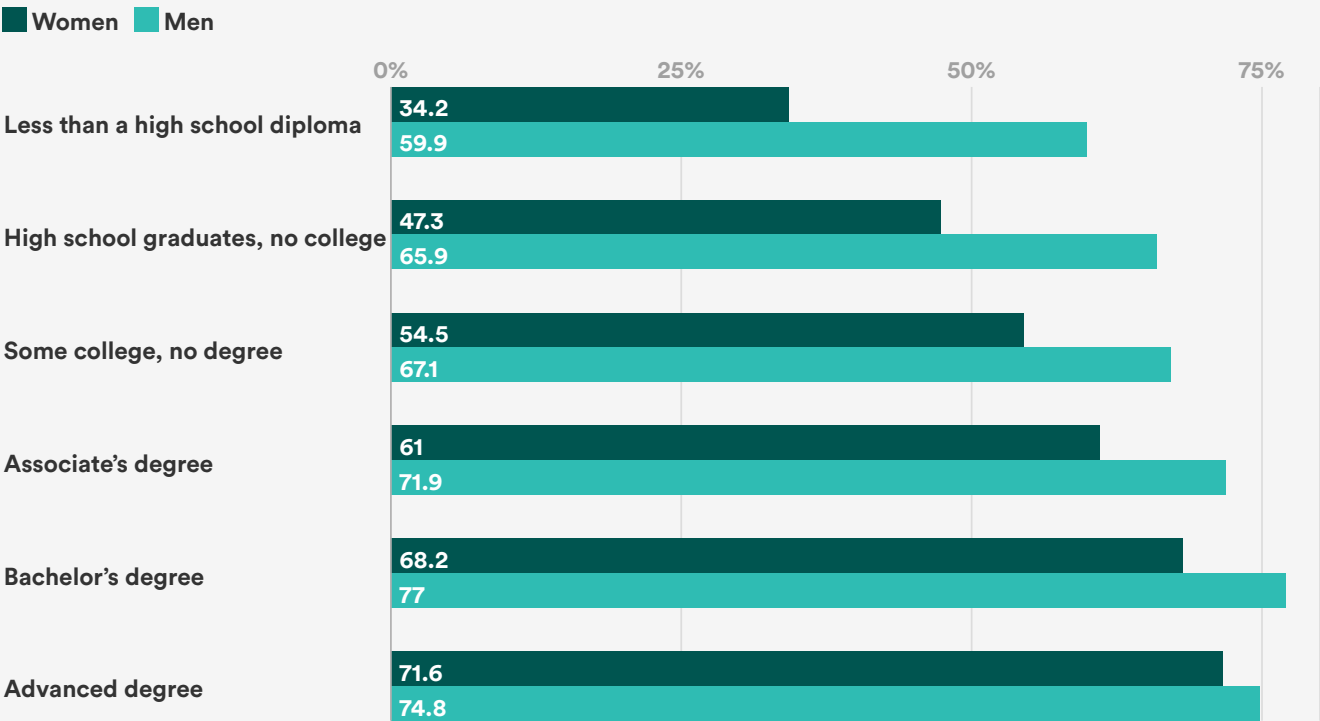
Women’s labor force participation lags behind men’s at every level of educational attainment.<sup>8</sup> Women with younger children have recently suffered dips in paid work, in part due to return-to-work requirements and difficulty finding quality, affordable child care.<sup>9</sup> Men with less education are also struggling.

At a time when the vast majority of workers report workplace changes and uncertainties are affecting them, there is an opportunity to acknowledge that concerns about job insecurity are common and shared.<sup>10</sup>



### Women’s Labor Force Participation at Every Level of Education Is Lower Than Men’s, but the Labor Market Is Challenging for All People with Less Education

Among U.S. adults age 25+, March 2025



Source: U.S. Labor Department Women’s Bureau Data, March 2025

Wages and Income

In 2024, women who worked full-time, year-round were paid an average of 81 cents for every dollar paid to men, and all women workers were paid an average of 76 cents for every dollar paid to all men with job-based earnings.<sup>11</sup> Black, Latine, white, and Asian women are paid less than men in their same racial or ethnic group and much less than white men.

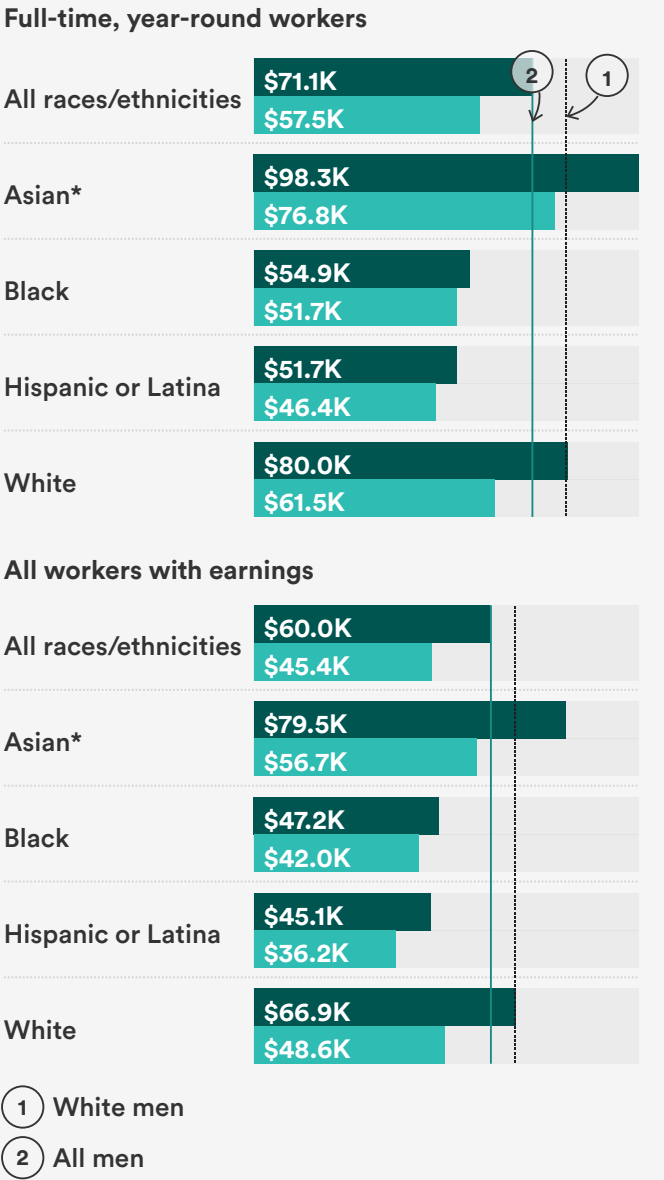
The underlying causes of the gender wage gap are complex, and include occupational segregation, fewer work hours even among full-time workers, time out of the workforce for parenting and caregiving, implicit and explicit workplace bias, and discrimination.<sup>12</sup> The gap is also worsened by differences in wage growth—in 2024, men’s average annual earnings rose by 3.7 percent but were unchanged for women.<sup>13</sup> The Institute for Women’s Policy Research estimates that, at the current rate of change over the last two decades, it will take until 2088 for all women to earn the same wages as all men.<sup>14</sup>

Although women face a persistent pay gap relative to men, income inequality is a factor that affects everyone in middle and lower-income households. The wealthiest 10 percent of U.S. households have an annual income of \$251,000, which is three times more than middle-income households (\$83,730 annual income) and 12.6 times more than the poorest 10 percent of U.S. households (\$19,990 annual income). Inequality exists between middle- and low-income households, as well.

Paying more attention to growing inequality between wealthier and poorer Americans may be one way to address the economic pressures that people of all genders face without perpetuating zero-sum messaging focused on gender. The causes and consequences of income inequality vary by gender, race, and ethnicity, but acknowledging shared pain emphasizes a common cause.

For Full-Time Workers, Women’s Earnings Are 81 Percent of Men’s. For Those Who Work Full or Part Time, the Gap Grows, and Women Are Paid About 76 Cents for Every Dollar Paid to Men.

Women’s earnings trail men’s within their same racial/ethnic group and compared to white men. Median annual earnings of **men** and **women** by race/ethnicity, 2024



\* Asian is included here as one category because disaggregated data for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander people separately has not yet been released; historically, median earnings have been lower for some subgroups.

Time Use

Day-to-day, women spend more time providing care to children and adults in their households, doing housework and food preparation, and purchasing goods and services, while men spend more time on paid work; organizational, civic, and religious activities; and caring for adults who live outside their household. Across their lifespans, women have less free time, spend less time socializing, and spend more time on care and household tasks than men.<sup>15</sup>

This unequal distribution of labor may be perpetuated by culture, preferences, and economics. Research shows that men would like to be more involved in caregiving but often feel held back by real or perceived expectations about their role as breadwinners.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Americans perceive society as valuing men’s contributions at work more than their contributions at home.<sup>17</sup>

Economic anxieties and time pressures that detract from caregiving create unique pressures for men.

Recent data from Equipundo’s *State of American Men* survey (2025) finds that economic anxieties related to job security, income, and basic family necessities are at the forefront of men’s concerns.

While women and men are nearly equally likely to worry about losing a job or income—44 percent of men and 40 percent of women—the societal consequences of job loss loom larger for men because of the ingrained notion that men must be providers.<sup>18</sup> Worries about not being able to provide for their families—now or in the future—are paramount, and often linked to mental health concerns, feelings of lacking purpose, and being held back from being the partner and caregiver men want to be.<sup>19</sup> Economic anxiety is also tied to definitions of masculinity that are becoming more constrained and traditional, particularly among Black and Latino men who face more economic exclusion.<sup>20</sup>

Many men also feel constrained by expectations of strength. Echoing the Equipundo research, a new study found that Gen Z men feel social pressure to be providers and protectors who are strong, wealthy, uncomplaining, unemotional, and self-reliant. A focus on what others think of them translates into feelings of failure, overextension, and exhaustion, and all of this can contribute to hostility toward women, alienation, and mental and emotional health challenges.<sup>21</sup>

Policies that address the very real and pressing financial, workplace, and caregiving concerns of many people—and cultural definitions of masculinity that make room for caregiving, community, and vulnerability—are partial answers to current challenges.

Women Report Spending More Time than Men on Household and Caregiving Activities

Hours per day spent on each activity among people who report doing this activity

	Men	Women
Working & related activities	8.32	7.73
Organizational, civic & religious activities*	2.43	2.38
Household activities*	2.26	2.71
Caring for non-household members*	2.18	1.85
Caring for household members, including children*	2.05	2.57
Buying goods & services*	1.54	1.83

\* A larger percentage of women report doing these activities than men do. In the case of care for non-household members, a higher share of women report spending time on this activity (10.5% of women compared to 6.4% of men), but women report spending fewer hours than men who engage in this use of time.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, 2024 (Table 1).



Many people have aspirations to break out of rigid gender roles, but are held back by economics, cultural expectations, and the lack of support for families.

Most adults in the U.S. can imagine gender roles and expectations looking different.

- Seventy-seven percent of adults in the U.S. say they believe that women and men should be equally involved at work and at home when they are raising children.<sup>22</sup>
- Adults say their peers do not place enough value on men who are caring (60 percent), open about emotions (60 percent), soft-spoken (55 percent), or affectionate (55 percent).<sup>23</sup>
- Fifty-seven percent of Americans say it's "very acceptable" for a man who is in a relationship with a woman to take care of their home and children while their wife works for pay.<sup>24</sup>
- Forty-one percent of TV and film viewers in the U.S. say that society is not accepting enough of women taking on more traditionally masculine roles and men taking on more traditionally feminine roles. Only 15 percent think society is too accepting.<sup>25</sup> These trends also hold among the U.S. public overall.<sup>26</sup>
- Among TV and film viewers, even people with conservative politics and views of gender are more likely to say society's level of acceptance is "about right" than to say society is "too accepting" of gender role flexibility.<sup>27</sup>

## Storytelling Tips to Acknowledge Pain Points and Shift Culture

- Acknowledge historic, persistent, and current challenges facing women, but don't discount the stresses, pressures, and barriers facing men.
- Show people of all genders grappling with these barriers and include story elements that incorporate systemic causes and solutions.
- Show allyship, fair partnership, and a common cause in the contexts of work and earnings, displays of emotion, and family and community care.
- Show men doing parenting tasks that people traditionally perceive mothers to be "better at," such as managing children's schedules, comforting children when they are upset, and helping children with school work.<sup>34</sup>
- Show mothers as competent disciplinarians who play with children. Those who perceive one gender as having an advantage, perceive fathers as being naturally "better" at these two tasks.<sup>35</sup>



## Storytellers can help to shift culture by leaning into modern depictions of gender rooted in common goals, interests, and values.

TV shows and films that show all people as capable of the full range of human work and family experiences, desires, and emotions can make a difference.

Although family, friends, and respected figures have the biggest influence on people's views of gender, about one-quarter of U.S. adults—women and men—say TV and movies influence their views about what it means to be a man or a woman.<sup>28</sup> This is especially true of women and men under.

Right now, television falls short in depicting men as caring and involved in household work, women as key family breadwinners, and caregiving as a part of life for all people.<sup>29</sup>

More than half of viewers want more realistic depictions of men as competent caregivers (59 percent), women as breadwinners (56 percent), a more accurate depiction of the gender split in household labor (52 percent), and caregiving (52 percent), while 16 percent of viewers or less are okay with current portrayals.<sup>30</sup>

There's a huge opportunity to shift culture, narratives, and perceptions about gender roles—and how people work and care. This is something audiences are eager to see.<sup>31</sup>

According to survey research among streaming viewers conducted by MarketCast for New America in 2025:

**Culture trumps biology:** Most streaming viewers (54 percent) agree that upbringing and culture influence women's and men's behavior far more than biology, while 32 percent say biology has the biggest influence on how women and men behave. Culture overrides biology among men and both older and younger women and men.

**Authenticity requires reflecting everyday struggles with work and family.** Fifty-eight percent of women and 55 percent of men say that shows and films are more authentic when they depict challenges related to work, family, and care that happen to people every day.

**Audiences want to see people being supported and successful:** About six in 10 viewers (both men and women) are extremely or very interested in seeing shows and films with storylines that include:

- Women finding success at work and being loving, positive parents at home;

- Men providing hands-on care to children or family members and succeeding at work;
- Characters support each other through work and caregiving challenges; and
- Characters who speak proudly rather than apologetically about being parents or caregivers.

### **Audiences are interested in media that explores expected and unexpected gender roles:**

- More than half of men (54 percent) and close to half of women (48 percent) are extremely or very interested in seeing male characters navigating traditionally female-held jobs like teaching or nursing.
- More than half of women (54 percent) and men (52 percent) are extremely or very interested in seeing women characters navigating traditionally male spheres and jobs.
- More than half of men (54 percent) but only 43 percent of women are very or extremely interested in seeing storylines with women managing children and home life, while men are families' primary breadwinners and decision makers.

**In a separate study of effective advertising, audiences said they most want to see male and female characters collaborating with and supporting each other.** Ads with modern, respectful portrayals of women and men have less bias, which contributes to higher purchase intentions, higher sales, and better product reputations. The study advises, "Men should not be seen 'mansplaining' and women should not be dismissive of men's feelings and efforts."<sup>32</sup>

**Eighty-seven percent of streaming viewers said that a television show or movie with a work, family, or care theme inspired them to think, behave, or act differently.** For those who believe culture plays the primary role in defining gender norms, media can be a powerful tool for validation, explanation, and developing understanding for others with different views. For those with more traditional views, there is an opportunity to educate, inspire understanding, and spark conversation.



## Examples We Love

- On HBO Max/Universal's comedy series *Hacks*, Deborah Vance and her adult daughter, DJ, have a fraught relationship because DJ felt like her mother's career came first when she was a child. Deborah carries enormous guilt for the choices she made, but ultimately makes peace with her decisions. The show acknowledges the pressure on women to succeed in environments dominated by men, and the imperfect solutions people find to resolving work and family conflict.
- The sixth and final season of NBC's drama *This Is Us* showed three very different male characters—husband Miguel and sons Randall and Kevin—providing end-of-life care and comfort to Rebecca. Research conducted by the Norman Lear Center for Caring Across Generations found that the series, and especially a stand-alone episode focused on Miguel, moved, inspired, and engaged viewers online.<sup>33</sup> The show also modeled work-parenting struggles, joys, conflicts, and negotiations in the relationships between Jack and Rebecca in the past and Randall and Beth, Kate and Toby, and Kevin and Madison in the present.
- In the first season of CBS's legal drama *Matlock*, Edwin and Maddie are guardians for their grandson, Alfie. Edwin takes on primary parenting responsibilities and pushes back when Maddie questions his parenting decisions. In the final episode of the season, Maddie, an older lawyer who is often underestimated both for her age and her gender, explains that she loves her work and wants to make up for the sacrifices she made when they were younger. Overall, Maddie and Edwin are strong partners and co-parents and work through their conflicts.
- On ABC crime procedural *9-1-1*, Hen and Karen navigate work-parenting challenges as a same-sex couple and illustrate how male-coded (i.e., working) and female-coded (i.e., parenting) roles are shaped by cultural pressures, a desire to share parenting in the face of unforgiving schedules, and a desire for companionship.

## About Us

The Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care initiative at New America's Better Life Lab advises entertainment creators and executives on ways to tell rich, meaningful stories and amplify the great shows and films already doing that work. We aim to see more authentic stories on screen that engage and grow audiences by reflecting their own lived experiences and aspirations.

[newamerica.org/entertainment](https://newamerica.org/entertainment)

## Learn More

This resource for creatives is one of many products built on our new audience research, which found that U.S. television and film viewers are hungry for stories about people managing work, family, caregiving, and personal obligations.

[newamerica.org/entertainment/2025research](https://newamerica.org/entertainment/2025research)

We also have tip sheets on writing about working parents, place-based stories about care, civic engagement on work-family issues, holistic pregnancy and abortion stories, and more.

[newamerica.org/entertainment/tipsheets](https://newamerica.org/entertainment/tipsheets)

For more information, please contact our founder and director:

**Vicki Shabo**

[shabo@newamerica.org](mailto:shabo@newamerica.org)

202.847.4771

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