



## Revisiting gender roles in late modern societies: A qualitative analysis through gender and family sociology

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### Abstract

Gender roles within family structures have undergone profound transformation in late modern societies, yet traditional expectations persist alongside emerging egalitarian ideals. This qualitative study examines the evolving nature of gender roles through the intersecting lenses of gender sociology and family sociology, employing feminist, functionalist, and postmodern theoretical frameworks. Drawing upon recent scholarship from 2019 to 2025, this paper explores how individuals negotiate inherited gender expectations within contemporary family contexts marked by shifting economic demands, changing educational patterns, and evolving cultural norms. The analysis reveals a complex landscape where women increasingly navigate what researchers term "patriarchal bargains"—negotiating traditional roles while pursuing modern aspirations. Findings suggest that while structural barriers to gender equality have diminished in education and professional sectors, persistent disparities in domestic labor distribution, leadership representation, and wage equity continue to shape family dynamics. The study contributes to contemporary discussions on gender ideology, power dynamics within households, and the transformation of family structures in late modernity.

**Keywords:** Gender roles, family sociology, feminist theory, postmodern family, domestic labor, late modernity

### Introduction

The study of gender roles remains one of the most dynamic and contested areas within sociology, reflecting the ongoing interplay between cultural expectations, institutional structures, and individual identity formation (Ortner, 2025)<sup>[4]</sup>. In late modern societies—characterized by rapid technological change, globalization, and the destabilization of traditional social categories—gender roles have become increasingly fluid yet paradoxically resistant to fundamental transformation. Contemporary families navigate a terrain where egalitarian ideals coexist uneasily with deeply embedded patriarchal structures, creating what scholars have described as a state of continuous tension and negotiation (Boumali, 2024)<sup>[1]</sup>.

The transformation of gender roles in the twenty-first century reflects broader societal shifts, including women's increased participation in higher education and professional careers, evolving family structures, and changing cultural consciousness regarding gender equality (Ortner, 2025)<sup>[4]</sup>. Yet these transformations have not occurred uniformly across societies or within individual households. As Lange (2025)<sup>[3]</sup> observed, the intricate processes through which families are constructed and maintained—what family sociologists term "doing family"—occur within a multipolar network of conditions that generate friction and require ongoing adaptation.

This paper examines the contemporary landscape of gender roles through a qualitative analysis of recent scholarly literature, seeking to understand how individuals and families negotiate inherited expectations within the context of late modern realities. The analysis proceeds through three theoretical lenses that have historically dominated sociological inquiry into gender and family: feminist theory, which centers power relations and patriarchal structures; functionalism, which examines how gender roles contribute to social stability and family functioning; and postmodern

perspectives, which emphasize fluidity, diversity, and the deconstruction of fixed gender categories.

The central questions guiding this inquiry are: How do inherited gender expectations shape contemporary family practices? What mechanisms facilitate or impede the transformation of traditional gender roles? And how do individuals, particularly women, navigate the tensions between modern aspirations and traditional expectations within their families of origin and the families they establish?

### Literature Review

#### Gender Roles in Sociological Perspective

Gender roles represent socially constructed expectations about behaviors, attitudes, and responsibilities considered appropriate for individuals based on their perceived gender (Ortner, 2025)<sup>[4]</sup>. These roles have historically been embedded in cultural norms, legal frameworks, and institutional practices, serving as organizing principles for family life, economic activity, and social interaction. The sociological study of gender roles has evolved considerably since the mid-twentieth century, moving from assumptions of natural complementarity between masculine and feminine roles toward critical examination of how gender categories are produced, maintained, and contested.

Contemporary scholarship recognizes that gender roles exist at the intersection of individual identity, family dynamics, and broader structural forces. As Gautam (2024)<sup>[2]</sup> noted, "The concept of gender roles, traditionally understood as a set of expectations regarding behaviours, duties, and functions associated with one's biological sex, has undergone significant transformations over the past century" (p. 2204). Yet these transformations remain incomplete and uneven, with traditional expectations continuing to exert influence even as they are challenged by changing material conditions and ideological commitments.

## The Late Modern Context

Late modernity presents distinctive challenges for the study and practice of gender roles within families. Lange (2025)<sup>[3]</sup> identified several key tensions characterizing this period: the relationship between families and the world of paid employment, connections to educational systems, engagement with healthcare institutions, and the pervasive influence of digitalization and mediatization. These tensions create what Lange termed "friction surfaces" that generate individual and familial stress, potentially contributing to what some scholars have identified as a broader societal care crisis.

The concept of "doing family" provides a useful framework for understanding how gender roles operate within this context. Rather than viewing family as a static institution with fixed roles, this praxeological approach emphasizes the ongoing, effortful processes through which family relationships are constructed and maintained (Lange, 2025)<sup>[3]</sup>. Gender expectations shape these processes in fundamental ways, influencing who performs what kinds of care work, how decisions are made, and how authority is distributed within households.

## Theoretical Frameworks

### Feminist Perspectives

Feminist theory has long provided critical tools for analyzing gender roles within families, emphasizing how seemingly natural divisions of labor reflect and reproduce patriarchal power structures. Contemporary feminist family science examines how women internalize, negotiate, and challenge gender role expectations across generations (Rachid, Boumali, & Kocabaçak, as cited in Springer Nature, 2025)<sup>[5]</sup>. Central to this analysis is the concept of "patriarchal bargains"—the strategies women employ to maximize their options within systems that constrain their choices (Springer Nature, 2025)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Recent phenomenological research with millennial mothers in Türkiye revealed the complexity of these negotiations. Women in the study both reinforced and resisted inherited gender norms, often becoming what researchers termed "primary rule enforcers" within their households despite desiring egalitarian relationships (Springer Nature, 2025)<sup>[5]</sup>. This finding suggests that the transformation of gender roles involves not simply adopting new ideals but engaging in difficult practical negotiations that unfold within existing power structures and cultural contexts.

Feminist scholars have also drawn attention to the persistent inequality in domestic labor distribution. Despite significant progress in education and professional participation, women globally continue to perform approximately 2.6 times more unpaid domestic and care work than men (Ortner, 2025)<sup>[4]</sup>. This disparity has profound implications for women's economic security, career advancement, and overall wellbeing, highlighting the incomplete nature of gender role transformation in late modern societies.

### Functionalist Perspectives

Functionalist theory approaches gender roles from a different angle, examining how differentiated roles contribute to family stability and social reproduction. Classical functionalism, associated with Talcott Parsons, posited that instrumental (male) and expressive (female) roles served complementary functions within the nuclear family unit. While this framework has been extensively

critiqued for naturalizing inequality and ignoring power dynamics, contemporary functionalist perspectives offer more nuanced analyses of how role differentiation operates within families.

From this perspective, the disruption of traditional gender roles may be understood as both a response to changing functional requirements—such as the economic necessity of dual-earner households—and a source of potential strain as families adapt to new configurations. Boumali (2024)<sup>[1]</sup> observed that changes in social norms have led both spouses to place high value on work and family roles, "challenging the traditional family structure in terms of roles and composition, with far-reaching implications for society" (para. 1). These implications include changes in marriage patterns, fertility decisions, and the overall organization of care work.

Yet functionalist analysis need not imply that traditional arrangements are optimal or that change is inherently problematic. Rather, it draws attention to the coordination challenges families face as they renegotiate roles and responsibilities. When both partners are committed to careers outside the home, questions of domestic labor distribution, childcare arrangements, and emotional support require explicit negotiation rather than defaulting to taken-for-granted patterns.

### Postmodern Perspectives

Postmodern approaches to gender and family reject the notion of fixed, universal categories, emphasizing instead the diversity, fluidity, and contextual nature of gender identities and family forms. From this perspective, late modernity is characterized by the destabilization of traditional categories and the proliferation of alternative ways of organizing intimate life. Gender roles are understood not as essential attributes of male and female persons but as performances that are continually enacted and potentially transformed.

Gautam (2024)<sup>[2]</sup> argued that "contemporary gender identities reflect a more fluid, multifaceted, and inclusive understanding of human identity, shaped by globalization, feminism, LGBTQ+ movements, and shifts in economic and social structures" (p. 2204). This fluidity represents both an expansion of possibilities and a source of uncertainty, as individuals navigate a landscape where traditional scripts provide less reliable guidance than in previous generations.

The postmodern family, in this view, is characterized by diversity rather than uniformity. Single-parent households, same-sex partnerships, blended families, and chosen families coexist alongside more traditional configurations. Gender roles within these various family forms may be negotiated in ways that depart significantly from historical patterns, creating opportunities for more egalitarian arrangements while also potentially generating new forms of tension and conflict.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine contemporary scholarship on gender roles in late modern societies. The research design involved systematic analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and research reports published between 2019 and 2025, focusing on empirical studies and theoretical analyses addressing gender roles within family contexts.

## Data Collection

Literature was identified through searches of academic databases including Springer Nature, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using search terms including "gender roles," "family sociology," "domestic labor," "feminist family theory," and "postmodern family." Selection criteria included: publication within the specified timeframe, focus on gender roles within family or household contexts, engagement with theoretical frameworks relevant to the study's aims, and publication in peer-reviewed venues.

The search process identified a substantial body of relevant literature, from which representative studies were selected for detailed analysis. Priority was given to studies that provided empirical data on contemporary patterns of gender role enactment, offered theoretical innovations or refinements, or examined gender roles in contexts characterized by tension between traditional expectations and modern aspirations.

## Analytical Approach

Analysis proceeded through multiple readings of selected texts, with attention to both empirical findings and theoretical framings. The researcher employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across the literature, including common findings regarding the persistence of gender inequality, mechanisms of role negotiation, and sources of transformation or resistance to change.

Particular attention was paid to how different theoretical frameworks—feminist, functionalist, and postmodern—illuminated different aspects of contemporary gender role dynamics. Rather than treating these frameworks as mutually exclusive, the analysis sought to identify complementary insights that together provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

## Reflexivity and Limitations

The qualitative nature of this study means that findings reflect the researcher's interpretive engagement with the literature rather than statistical generalization. The selection of studies, while guided by explicit criteria, inevitably reflects judgments about relevance and significance that another researcher might make differently. Additionally, the focus on English-language publications may have excluded important scholarship from non-Anglophone contexts.

## Findings

### Theme 1: The Persistence of Traditional Gender Schemas

Despite significant shifts in educational attainment and workforce participation, traditional gender schemas continue to shape family practices in late modern societies. Women now comprise approximately 57% of college graduates globally, representing a dramatic reversal of historical patterns (Ortner, 2025) <sup>[4]</sup>. Yet this educational achievement has not translated into proportional representation in positions of power and leadership, with women holding only about 23% of CEO positions (Ortner, 2025) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Within households, the persistence of traditional patterns is even more pronounced. The finding that women perform 2.6 times more unpaid domestic and care work than men (Ortner, 2025) <sup>[4]</sup> suggests that the "second shift" identified by sociologists decades ago remains a defining feature of

contemporary family life. This disparity persists even in dual-earner households where both partners work similar hours outside the home, indicating that factors beyond simple time availability shape the distribution of domestic labor.

The research with millennial mothers in Türkiye revealed how traditional gender schemas are transmitted across generations even when women consciously seek to establish more egalitarian relationships (Springer Nature, 2025) <sup>[5]</sup>. The study identified three main themes—roles, authority, and transition—that illuminate the complex processes through which inherited expectations interact with contemporary aspirations. Notably, even women who desired egalitarian partnerships often found themselves becoming the primary enforcers of household rules and routines, suggesting that behavioral patterns may persist even when ideological commitments have shifted.

### Theme 2: Patriarchal Bargains and Strategic Negotiation

Feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the strategic negotiations women undertake within contexts that constrain their choices. The concept of "patriarchal bargains" captures how women navigate systems that offer certain benefits in exchange for compliance with traditional expectations (Springer Nature, 2025) <sup>[5]</sup>. These bargains are not simply capitulations to patriarchal power but represent active, if constrained, choices that reflect women's assessments of available options and likely outcomes.

In the Turkish context, researchers found that women engaged in complex negotiations between traditional expectations associated with their families of origin and modern aspirations shaped by education, employment, and exposure to alternative models (Springer Nature, 2025) <sup>[5]</sup>. The shift from extended to nuclear family structures created new spaces for negotiation while also potentially isolating women from traditional support networks.

The "Authority Wheel" concept introduced in this research illustrates a particularly interesting dynamic: women who sought egalitarian relationships often became the primary authority figures within their households, responsible for establishing and enforcing rules while their male partners occupied more peripheral positions in domestic governance (Springer Nature, 2025) <sup>[5]</sup>. This pattern suggests that the transformation of gender roles may involve not simply the redistribution of existing responsibilities but the emergence of new configurations of domestic power that do not map neatly onto either traditional or egalitarian ideals.

### Theme 3: Structural Barriers and Institutional Contexts

Gender roles within families cannot be understood in isolation from the broader institutional contexts in which families are embedded. Lange (2025) <sup>[3]</sup> identified relationships with paid employment, education systems, and healthcare institutions as key sites where families negotiate gender expectations. Each of these institutional spheres presents distinct demands and opportunities that shape how gender roles are enacted within households.

The relationship between family and employment has received particular attention, given the economic necessity of dual-earner arrangements in many contexts. When both partners work for pay, questions of domestic labor distribution become more pressing and more contested. Research suggests that while attitudes toward working

mothers have become more accepting, practical arrangements often continue to disadvantage women, who are more likely to reduce work hours, decline promotions, or exit the workforce entirely when family demands intensify (Boumali, 2024) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Educational institutions also play a significant role in shaping gender expectations, both through formal curriculum and informal socialization processes. The dramatic increase in women's educational attainment suggests that schools have become more gender-equal in important respects. Yet educational success does not automatically translate into labor market equality or transformation of domestic arrangements, indicating that multiple institutional domains must be engaged for comprehensive change to occur.

#### **Theme 4: Digitalization and New Forms of Family Practice**

The pervasive influence of digital technologies represents a distinctive feature of late modern family life that shapes gender role enactment in complex ways. Lange (2025) <sup>[3]</sup> emphasized that digitalization and mediatization "permeate all fields" of family practice, creating new opportunities and challenges for how families coordinate activities, maintain relationships, and negotiate responsibilities.

Digital technologies potentially enable more flexible arrangements of work and family, allowing parents to work remotely and remain available for childcare or other domestic responsibilities. Yet research suggests that these possibilities are not gender-neutral in their effects. Women may face intensified demands as the boundaries between work and home become more permeable, finding themselves simultaneously available for professional and domestic responsibilities in ways that increase rather than decrease their total workload.

Social media and digital communication also shape how gender roles are represented, contested, and transmitted. Exposure to alternative models of family life through digital media may contribute to changing expectations, particularly among younger generations. At the same time, digital platforms can reinforce traditional ideals through targeted advertising, influencer content, and algorithmic amplification of gender-stereotyped material.

#### **Discussion**

The findings of this qualitative analysis reveal a complex landscape in which traditional gender roles persist alongside significant transformation. Late modern societies are characterized not by simple movement from traditional to egalitarian arrangements but by ongoing tension, negotiation, and reconfiguration of gender expectations within and across generations.

#### **Integrating Theoretical Perspectives**

Each of the theoretical frameworks employed in this analysis illuminates different aspects of contemporary gender role dynamics. Feminist perspectives highlight the persistence of patriarchal structures and power inequalities that shape women's choices and constrain possibilities for transformation. The concept of patriarchal bargains helps explain why women may participate in arrangements that appear to disadvantage them, recognizing the strategic calculations involved in navigating constrained choice environments.

Functionalist analysis draws attention to the coordination challenges families face as they adapt to changing economic and social conditions. When traditional scripts no longer provide reliable guidance for role allocation, families must develop new mechanisms for negotiating responsibilities and managing competing demands. This perspective helps explain the friction and stress that characterize many contemporary family arrangements, without necessarily endorsing traditional patterns as superior alternatives.

Postmodern perspectives emphasize the diversity of family forms and the fluidity of gender identities in late modernity. This framework helps situate the findings within a broader context of destabilized categories and proliferating alternatives, suggesting that the tensions observed in contemporary families may represent transitional dynamics rather than permanent features of gender relations.

#### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings suggest several directions for policy interventions aimed at promoting gender equity within families. The researchers studying millennial mothers in Türkiye recommended parental education initiatives, work-life balance reforms, and school-based programs designed to disrupt rigid gender schemas (Springer Nature, 2025) <sup>[5]</sup>. Such interventions must address multiple institutional domains simultaneously, recognizing that gender roles within families are shaped by employment policies, educational practices, and healthcare systems as well as cultural expectations.

Work-life balance reforms appear particularly important given the persistent inequality in domestic labor distribution. Policies that enable and encourage men's greater participation in care work—including paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and workplace cultures that do not penalize men for prioritizing family responsibilities—may help shift the distribution of unpaid work within households. However, policy changes alone are unlikely to be sufficient without accompanying shifts in cultural expectations and individual attitudes.

Educational interventions represent another important avenue for change. Ortner (2025) <sup>[4]</sup> emphasized the need for "continued policy interventions and social awareness initiatives" to address structural barriers and cultural expectations that perpetuate traditional role divisions. School-based programs that expose children to diverse models of gender expression and family organization may help disrupt the intergenerational transmission of rigid gender schemas.

#### **Directions for Future Research**

This analysis suggests several priorities for future research on gender roles in late modern societies. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in gender role attitudes and behaviors across the life course would help clarify the dynamics of transformation and the conditions under which change occurs or stalls. Comparative research examining gender roles across different national and cultural contexts would illuminate how structural and cultural factors interact to shape possibilities for change.

Research on men's experiences of changing gender expectations remains underdeveloped relative to the extensive scholarship on women's negotiations of work and family. Understanding how men navigate shifting expectations—including pressures to be more involved

parents while continuing to fulfill breadwinner roles—would provide a more complete picture of contemporary gender dynamics.

Finally, research on the role of digital technologies in shaping gender role expectations and practices represents an important frontier. As Lange (2025) <sup>[3]</sup> emphasized, digitalization permeates all aspects of family life, yet its implications for gender relations remain incompletely understood. Studies examining how families use digital tools to coordinate responsibilities, how social media shapes gender expectations, and how technology-enabled flexible work arrangements affect domestic labor distribution would contribute valuable knowledge to this evolving field.

## Conclusion

Gender roles in late modern societies exist in a state of tension between inherited expectations and emerging possibilities. This qualitative analysis of recent scholarship reveals persistent inequalities in domestic labor distribution, leadership representation, and wage equity, even as women's educational and professional achievements have advanced dramatically. The theoretical frameworks of feminism, functionalism, and postmodernism each illuminate different aspects of this complex landscape, together providing a multidimensional understanding of contemporary gender dynamics.

The concept of patriarchal bargains captures the strategic negotiations women undertake within constrained choice environments, while the notion of "doing family" emphasizes the ongoing, effortful processes through which families construct and maintain themselves across generations. These processes unfold within a multipolar network of institutional relationships—with employment, education, healthcare, and digital technology—that shape how gender roles are enacted within households.

The findings suggest that transforming gender roles requires sustained intervention across multiple domains, including policy reforms that enable more equitable distribution of care work, educational initiatives that disrupt rigid gender schemas, and cultural change that expands possibilities for how individuals can enact gender within their families and communities. The late modern context presents both challenges and opportunities for such transformation, as traditional categories become destabilized and alternative arrangements proliferate.

Ultimately, the question of gender roles in contemporary families is not simply a private matter of individual negotiation but a public concern with implications for social equality, economic productivity, and human flourishing. As societies continue to grapple with inherited expectations and emerging realities, sociological research provides essential tools for understanding the present and imagining more equitable futures.

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