



Council on Contemporary Families **Gender Matters** Symposium

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CCF Gender Matters Symposium

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Executive Summary: Gender Matters in Every Aspect of Our Lives - and what you need to know to keep up

**Executive summary prepared for CCF by Virginia Rutter, Professor of Sociology, Framingham State University.*

CCF's Online Symposium, [Gender Matters](#), introduces you to some important new work featured in the newly published [Handbook of the Sociology of Gender](#), in which a prestigious roster of contributors examines how gender affects childhood, parenting, work, and sexuality, and comments on the complex interactions between gender relationships, racial inequalities, and globalization. The lead essay in this symposium, by sociologist Barbara Risman, summarizes the extent to which gender continues to influence every aspect of life, despite real progress in breaking down traditional stereotypes and limits. Risman notes the increased normalization of non-binary ways of organizing personal identity and social life and argues -- somewhat controversially even in feminist circles -- that achieving true equality requires us to move beyond gender.

Austin, TX, August 8, 2018—Changes in gender values and behaviors are not just making it to the mainstream, they are changing the mainstream. Consider this: Among the most popular—and intensively [reviewed](#)--*Netflix* comedy hours currently features [Hannah Gadsby](#). Part of her routine, as described on her widely [followed twitter](#) feed, is to eschew “the concept of the gender binary.”

But what does it mean to reject the “gender binary”? And is that even possible? To explain what some gender researchers are arguing, CCF asked several of the contributors to the [Handbook of the Sociology of Gender](#) to summarize their current research. Barbara Risman, lead editor of the *Handbook*, gave an [overview](#) of the findings, including the evidence that gender identities and behaviors are not determined by biology, as so many people believe, and that they vary substantially by race, ethnicity, and class.

Risman presents three pieces of this new reality:

Women are never returning to domesticity. [Mothers are far more likely to work for pay than in the past; they return to work earlier after having a child; and they work for longer periods of their lives.](#) As highlighted in the interviews Risman conducted for her recent book, [Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Structure](#), youth today overwhelmingly reject the expectation that women belong in the home specializing in the care of children.

Feminism is not just a women's movement. The [latest General Social Survey data](#) show that gender equality – at home and at work -- is embraced nearly as much by men as by women. In fact, the gap between men's and women's attitudes is now the smallest ever recorded.

Millennials are mainly gender libertarians: For the youngest generation of adults, the Millennials, Risman found that independence, autonomy, and self-determination are key features of how they identify themselves—and free will is what they expect for others. This aligns with [research highlighted here](#) where only a small fraction of survey respondents rated themselves “highly” gender typical: in other words, a representative

sample showed that a gender “binary” (aka people are simply all *this* kind or all *that* kind) is not all that common.

But, Risman points out, remnants of the older gender system continue to be reproduced in family rituals, child-raising, educational institutions, public policy, and work. Several contributors to the symposium describe how.

In [Not Just Kid Stuff: Becoming Gendered](#), Heidi Gansen (Northwestern University) and Karin Martin (University of Michigan) show how differential discipline reinforces gender disparities in preschools. But as Kenly Brown (University of California at Berkeley) reports in [Gender, Race, and Girls in California’s Alternative Schools](#), racism also creates differential discipline, sometimes masquerading as protection, that results in the marginalization of poor Black girls.

Emily W. Kane, in [Parenting and the Gender Trap](#), reports on how parenting practices create inequalities in wages and housework between mothers and fathers, even those who share breadwinning, and how that imbues children with gendered expectations for their own futures. Immigrant families face added challenges, because many host countries grant one partner a work visa but forbid the other to work. In [Housewife Visas and Highly Skilled Immigrant Families in the U.S.](#), Pallavi Banerjee (University of Calgary), explains the hardships that will result from the current administration’s proposal to reinstate the H-4 visa, barring “trailing spouses” of high-skill workers (who come to the U.S. under an H-1B visa) from any kind of employment.

In other cases, immigration policies interact with gender inequalities to create widespread patterns of family separation that result in chains of displaced caregiving. Maria Hwang (Rice University) and Carolyn Choi and Rhacel Parreñas (University of Southern California) note in [Separating Migrant Families, as Practiced around the Globe](#) that “family separation is a *central* feature of international temporary labor migration policies that promote the recruitment of migrant workers but bar them from migrating with their families.” Often, women in third-world countries can support their own children only by migrating abroad to care for other women’s children, requiring female kin and friends at home to try to fill their shoes.

Two other briefs in the [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) focus on hidden bias in the workplace. Indiana University’s Koji Chavez, in [Gender, Tech Jobs, and Hidden Biases that Make a Difference](#), points out that even when tech firms hire equal numbers of males and females, they “tend to hire male engineers more for their perceived technical skills and female engineers more for their perceived ‘people’ skills.” This channels women into a track with fewer pay and promotion possibilities than those available to their male counterparts.

Yet Alison Wynn and Shelley Correll, from Stanford’s Clayman Institute for Gender Research, report some good news in [Combating Gender Bias in Modern Workplaces](#): “Research consistently shows that unconscious or implicit gender biases systematically hinder women’s advancement in the workplace,” especially when criteria for hiring and advancement are ambiguous or informal. Using a [“small wins model”](#) of organizational change, however, they were able to significantly reduce the role of implicit bias in hiring and promotion decisions.

The symposium also includes work on sexuality: Nicholas Velotta and Pepper Schwartz write about [The Push and Pull of Sex, Gender, and Aging](#). Increasingly, women feel entitled to have a romantic and sexual life as they age. Although women face more pressure than men to retain youthful-looking sexiness, often making them feel they must have cosmetic surgery, Velotta and Schwartz point to a growing number of older Hollywood icons who still make it into the “sexy” category as evidence of change. Ironically, however, men as well as women now report pressure to maintain their youthful looks.

There’s much more. Reporters can find a host of other sources in the [Handbook of the Sociology of Gender](#). [C.J. Pascoe](#) writes about sex in high school. [Virginia Rutter](#) and Braxton Jones compile the latest work on the impact of gender fluidity on doing sex. [Georgiann Davis](#) writes about human rights for intersex people. [Arielle Kuperberg](#) profiles the latest work on hooking up. [Katie Acosta](#) examines gender non conformity in families. The entire table of contents is [here](#), and CCF can help connect you to all authors.

“This research is just the tip of a very large iceberg,” says Stephanie Coontz, Director of Research and Public Education at the Council on Contemporary Families. “CCF has been a focal point for research on the gender [revolution](#), including [setbacks](#) and [stalls](#) that continue to be evident even in the context of historic change. But as many authors here point out, the advantages and disadvantages that men and women encounter in a gendered world are often modified, and occasionally counteracted, by the dynamics of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Researchers need to explore the contradictions, trade-offs, costs, and benefits of our changing gender order.”

Keynote: Gender Structures Every Aspect of Life

The [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf) keynote essay was prepared for the [Council on Contemporary Families](#) by Barbara J. [Risman](#), University of Illinois-Chicago. Risman is co-editor, with Carissa Froyum and William Scarborough, of the recently released [Handbook of The Sociology of Gender](#) (Springer 2018), which includes forty chapters examining new research on gender diversity and change on issues ranging from the gendering of childhood to the impact of gender on work and parenting to changes in sex for the over-sixty population. This essay summarizes some of that research, along with Risman's findings in [Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Structure](#) (Oxford, 2018). Risman's takeaway: Gender matters, now more than ever, because it structures every aspect of life. And we benefit from knowing how it matters.

Questions.

You cannot pick up a newspaper today without seeing debates about whether masculinity is in crisis, whether women are “opting out” of work or choosing work over motherhood, and who can use which bathrooms. Why are so many young people today dissatisfied with familiar and traditional genders? Are they rejecting the stereotypes that demand boys to be tough and girls to take care of everyone's feelings? Are they rejecting the very categories of male and female, and the conventional demand that you can be only one or the other? Or are the debates just “fake news” at a time when most people perfectly happy with traditional gender categories?

Answers: The undisputed changes.

Some things are pretty clear cut. First, women are never going back to the home. The outward movement of women into the work force since the early 1970s has leveled off for now, but mothers are far more likely to [work for pay](#) than in the past; they return to work earlier after having a child; and they work for longer periods of their lives. In my in-depth interviews with 116 Midwestern Millennials for [Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Structure](#), almost no one, not even the most devoutly religious respondents, told me that mothers belong at home with their children.

Second, feminism is no longer just a women's movement. The General Social Survey has been asking questions about people's support for gender equality since the mid-1970s. As of the [latest survey, in 2016](#), support has reached an all-time high, and the gap between men's and women's opinions has sunk to an all-time low, with most of the change due to men's “catching up” with women in their support for equality. Many men I interviewed were every bit as egalitarian as the most feminist women I talked to, and several were far *more* feminist than most women. A substantial portion of female and male feminist “innovators” entirely reject gender expectations and stereotypes.

Third, nearly all young adults today consider themselves libertarian about gender. They refuse to judge people who are different from themselves in terms of gender identity or expectations. Several male respondents told me that although they would never wear nail polish, they think other men should be free to do so without harassment. Even those very religious respondents

who believed that men should have more authority than women in families *also* believed that women and men should be equal at work.

Disputed—or at least unfamiliar—changes from the view of older generations.

While support for gender and sexual equality is now more prevalent, views of gender and sexuality have become more complicated. Millennials are increasingly supportive of transgendered individuals. Some Millennials reject any gender binary at all. These “genderqueer” respondents do not want to switch their sex category—neither biologically nor legally. They reject the belief that they must be gendered at all, even in how they adorn and inhabit their body. Some genderqueer Millennials are content to identify as a sex category (e.g. as female) but reject the gender category woman. Others just skip categories altogether. When Washington State recently allowed people to check an X option instead of male or female on their official forms, they noted that this option could be used by people who identified as [“intersex, amender, amalgagender, androgynous, bigender, demigender, female-to-male, genderfluid, genderqueer, male-to-female, neutrois, nonbinary, pangender, third sex, transgender, transsexual, Two Spirit, and unspecified.”](#) These categories encompass very different people, with distinct identities, behaviors, and values. When it comes to gender and sexual identity, we have gone far beyond a mere 50 shades of gray.

What research tells us about how the new diversity matters.

To understand this new diversity, we need to talk about exactly what the word “gender” means. In our forthcoming [Handbook of the Sociology of Gender](#) (co-edited with Carissa Froyum and William Scarborough), 65 scholars analyze specific ways that people are doing – and undoing – gender, and report on *how it matters*. Unless otherwise noted, the research evidence I cite here is from the *Handbook*.

Let’s start with new vocabulary, and how it matters. Sex is the *presumably* biological category you were labeled at birth, male or female. I say presumably because the biological categories are not always clear. Some children are born with internal female organs, but an extended clitoris that appears to be a micro-phallus. Even *intersex* people, who have both male and female body parts, are usually, if mistakenly, labeled male or female at birth. The very definition of biological facts is shaped by an assumption that there are two and only two possible sex categories. But even when children meet the biological definition of male or female, sometimes that sex category doesn’t fit with their identity, and they reject it. *Transgender* people reject the sex category they were raised in, and identify as male or female despite their childhood label and rearing. As mentioned above, *genderqueer* people reject their categorization as women or men: Rather than identify as the other category, they reject categories, and identify as between the binary. At this moment in time, the language for describing gender is as *fluid* as gender itself has become.

Biology does not determine all.

All this shows that gender is based on a lot more than sex organs or biology. Those who are skeptical about gender equality movements often argue that men and women evolved biologically to exhibit different kinds of behaviors that are driven by their genetic heritage. Yet genes don’t work that way. To wit: the new field of epigenetics shows how genes are triggered by environmental factors and lead to different outcomes in different contexts. In their chapter for

the *Handbook*, Davis and Blake show that while bodies play a role in people's sense of self, most of the differences social scientists can measure between women and men are not choreographed by genes or hormones. Hormones exist in the body, but adult experiences shape hormones as well as vice versa. For example, winning a competition can raise testosterone levels, while taking care of a baby lowers it. This is true for men *and* women. Biology simply doesn't explain how different gender identities are created or how the workplace is organized and jobs are distributed according to gender. Taking care of preschoolers in a nursery requires more energy, upper-body strength, and ability to respond rapidly to emergencies than parking cars at a hotel, yet the former jobs are typically held by women and the latter by men. Guess who gets paid more?

How we train boys and girls into gender.

As symposium and *Handbook* contributors Gansen and Martin show in "[Not Just Kid Stuff: Becoming Gendered](#)," boys and girls are systematically raised to become different kinds of people. This task involves parents, peers, media, and often even daycare center staff. Raising girls who love dolls and boys who love vehicles can be as obvious as steering girls to the kitchen and boys to the trains, but the socialization that creates feminine girls and masculine boys is often nowadays *far less obvious*. Girls are shamed for being "unladylike" while boys are shamed for being "unmanly." Female-bodied children are taught to "throw like a girl" while male-bodied children are corrected when they do so.

Kane's *Handbook* article, updated in the symposium's "[Parenting and the Gender Trap](#)," illustrates how when partners become parents they reproduce such gender socialization and pass it on to the next generation. Despite mothers and fathers both working for pay outside the home, mothers often continue to manage the household and provide more nurturing for children. And so the circle continues: By just watching their own parents, many children learn that it is women who take care of other people. Kenly Brown's research on alternative schools (e.g. schools for children who cannot attend conventional ones) in "[Gender, Race, and Girls in California's Alternative Schools](#)" suggests that such gender socialization and expectations interact in complex ways with racial stereotypes, however, contributing "to the isolation of marginalized students, particularly low-income Black girls, who are the most vulnerable to violence and neglect in their interpersonal lives."

Doing gender 24/7.

Gender is not just about how people are raised. In *everyday*, routine activities, gender organizes people's lives even more directly. People use their gender training to display and claim they are male or female, and they watch for cues to assess the gender of others. We don't really judge someone's sex by inspecting naked bodies. Instead, we assess other people's gender identity by their dress and behavior. Everyday interaction looks natural, but it is highly choreographed. People are nearly all evaluated by how well they "do gender." People expect you to "act your age" -- and your gender. Parents and romantic partners are expected to do and be different things according to whether they are male or female. We assume mothers, wives, and girlfriends will provide emotional comfort, and that fathers, husbands, and boyfriends will be physically assertive, whether as protectors or aggressors. And if real people don't conform to gender stereotypes, their [public images are often reworked](#) to do so. For example, sociologist Philip Cohen found that images of Princess Diana showed her six inches shorter than Prince Charles, despite the fact that they were actually the same height.

The ideal worker and your unconscious.

Fisk and Ridgeway's *Handbook* essay notes that people instantly and unconsciously sex categorize each other, and in doing so, they invoke deep cultural beliefs without even knowing it. Men are seen as more effective as leaders, accorded higher status than women, and given more influence in group settings. But gender matters beyond these stereotypes because we have quite literally built schools, workplaces, and the economy around traditional genders. Gender matters not just as identity or ideology, but as a core component of how our social world is organized. Just as every society has an economic and political structure, so too every society has a gender structure.

Some people may operate in social contexts where they are evaluated more positively if they reject doing gender traditionally, but the expectations remain in both conservative and progressive settings. And whatever people believe, all must adapt to organizations and institutions that are based on the belief that "ideal" workers are entirely and uniquely committed to the business at hand, which rewards the typically male life course and the historically masculine privilege of having a domestic wife. Women who return to their paid labor a few weeks, or months, after adopting or birthing a child are commonly asked how they can bear to leave their infant, while fathers often stigmatized if they do not increase their efforts to earn a larger paycheck.

When one thinks about gender structures encountered every day, the world of work is an obvious place to start. Everyone needs to earn a living, or lives with someone who does, and so workplaces are significant in everyone's life. The most obvious way gender structures work is by assuming that the "ideal worker" does not experience pregnancy and has no moral or practical responsibilities for taking care of anyone but himself (and perhaps has a wife to do even that). Any organization that assumes workers are available from nine to five (or often, nowadays, 24/7) over a lifetime, has baked gender expectations – and gender discrimination -- into its very DNA.

This is a caregiving penalty, and it translates into a motherhood penalty. Even so, this is not the only way workplaces disadvantage women. Wynn and Correll's "[Combating Gender Bias in Modern Workplaces](#)" shows how stereotypes limit women's success in the corporate sector. Women and men hold stereotypes that men are more competent and women more nurturing. When it comes to hiring and promotion, those biases hurt women's chances by increasing the scrutiny women face. On the one hand, highly competent women are seen as less likeable. On the other, if they are mothers, employers often believe they will not be committed to their work. Chavez, in "[Gender, Tech Jobs, and Hidden Biases that Make a Difference](#)," notes that even in industries where women and men are equally likely to be hired, women are often hired for different reasons than men. Women are hired for their "people" skills, for example, rather than their technical ones -- and this may decrease their chance of promotion.

These biases not only decrease women's workplace opportunities; they *increase* men's. In effect, unconscious bias and workplace family policies are affirmative action policies for men -- especially white men with wives. Chavez [reports](#) how gender stereotypes do not operate entirely the same for Blacks, Whites, Latinx, and Asians. White men with wives are the primary beneficiaries of this organizational affirmative action for men while men of color often are not.

Public policy.

Workplaces are not unique in having been built from the ground up with gender expectations embedded in their very design. Even apparently gender-neutral governmental regulations often incorporate gendered assumptions into their foundation. In her research on immigrant families, Banerjee ([“Housewife Visas and Highly Skilled Immigrant Families in the U.S.”](#)) shows that the visas for skilled workers were designed long ago for men with housewives. Skilled workers’ spouses were admitted to the United States on “dependent visas,” because they were expected to be stay-at-home wives who neither needed nor deserved work permits. While that policy was jettisoned by the Obama Administration, it has recently been re-enacted. The result, Banerjee shows, is that wives of male high-tech workers -- and husbands of female nurses -- are forced to be economically dependent partners, and this negatively affects their families. In the future, it may disadvantage America, as new talent will choose other more family-friendly destinations. While gender inequality affects the experience of migration for the professional workers Banerjee studies, the high rate of migration globally has gendered consequences for workers at every level. As Choi, Hwang, and Parreñas report in [“Separating Migrant Families, as Practiced around the Globe,”](#) men and women migrate internationally for paid work at almost the same rate, but family separation leads to new inequalities: Women still solely face the expectations to hold the family together while they also provide financial support while men are considered good fathers for their remittances. Women even face shaming for leaving the caretaking work for their own children to other women left back home.

Seemingly family-friendly work policies remain gendered. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, women receive [16 weeks of paid maternity leave](#), while men get two days. The law still assumes--and ensures--that mothers take more responsibility for children than fathers. In that country, the right to work part-time has created a society where women are assumed to be on a mommy track, and the glass ceiling is really a glass floor that keeps women on a lower level because they never get—or are expected to have—intensive work experience.

Reflections and resolution.

Overall, much work is left to do before we have a society where gender is not embedded in much of the law and most of the social institutions, along with the cultural beliefs that legitimate them. In fact, given the accumulating research highlighted in the [Handbook of the Sociology of Gender](#), I believe that as long as we operate under a gender structure that assumes a male-female binary, none of us will be free from the historical constraints of institutionalized sexism, with its assumption that there are only two categories, and that those are opposites, conferring unequal capacities and justifying unequal treatment. For human beings to develop fully as effective rational actors and warm nurturing human beings, we need a world where the sex category assigned to babies won’t dictate how they are raised or what we expect from them as children, teens, or adults.

This is why sociologists spend so much time studying gender. As Judith Lorber has written, the [paradox of gender](#) is that we must make it very visible before we can begin to dismantle it. My utopian goal is to eliminate the gender structure entirely. While not all feminists agree--not even all the authors in the new *Handbook*--I believe that full equality demands we create a world beyond gender.

In the meantime, however, the research recounted here reveals progress and points to ways in which can continue the march toward gender equality. Most Americans now believe that men and women should have equal rights and responsibilities both in public and private spheres. My [own recent research](#) with Ray Sin and William Scarborough suggests that the belief that women belong in the home and men in the public sphere is now nearly extinct. That indeed is a major feminist accomplishment.

There is other good news as well. Velotta and Schwartz (“[The Push and Pull of Sex, Gender, and Aging](#)”) show us that women and men have more romantic and sexual options throughout the course of their lives than in the past, despite obstacles posed by the continued problems of ageism and sexism. In the world of work, the articles by [Wynn and Correll](#) and Fisk and Ridgeway profile practices that reduce the impact of gender bias in hiring and promotion, which in turn breaks down sexist stereotypes. Recent data suggest that every generation of men is doing more child care than before, a process that accelerates [when governments adopt “use it or lose it” paternity leave](#). And as men in highly visible roles take parental leaves and share caretaking, this further erodes cultural stereotypes about masculinity. Our *Handbook* discusses in more depth the challenges and opportunities facing the movement for gender equality.

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Not Just Kid Stuff: Becoming Gendered

A briefing paper prepared by Heidi Gansen, Northwestern University, and Karin Martin, University of Michigan for the Council on Contemporary Families' [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf).

Children are gendered by parents before they are born. What does that mean? As soon as parents know if “it’s a boy!” or “it’s a girl!” they start to imagine different children and childhoods. From birth, children are treated differently by gender and learn to “do” their gender from families, peers, school, and media. Parents and families buy different clothes and toys for boys and girls and decorate their rooms differently. Observers ascribe different traits (e.g. tough, brave) to a baby that is assumed to be a boy (even if it’s not) than to a baby perceived to be a girl.

We don’t even know we are doing this.

Things we do not think of as constructing gender differences do, as we write in “Becoming Gendered” in the [Handbook of the Sociology of Gender](#). For example, preschools are heightened incubators of gender difference. Preschool teachers have differential responses to boys’ and girls’ behaviors, such as permitting informal behaviors for boys (lying down during circle time; loudness) and requiring more formal school behaviors for girls (indoor voices; sitting up straight).

Except when we do.

In some preschools, the curriculum is explicitly gendered. Beginning in preschool, some teachers see instructing children about their gender’s behavioral expectations or responsibilities as an explicit component of their curriculum and teaching practices. In work forthcoming in *Sex Roles*, Gansen interviewed and observed teachers in three preschools (nine preschool classrooms total). She found that teachers in the three preschools disciplined boys and girls differently and created gendered stories to account for and justify their gendered beliefs, expectations, and disciplinary practices.

For example, in all three preschools that Gansen observed, when girls were not following teacher instructions to clean up, girls were disciplined by having to clean up an area by themselves. In one classroom, if there was nothing left for girls to clean up, teachers would have a child or teacher dump a container of toys on the floor. These dumped-out toys were then the girls’ “responsibility” to clean up on their own. However, in none of the nine classrooms that Gansen observed did teachers discipline boys by having them clean up without assistance from their peers or a teacher. Instead, teachers in these nine classrooms frequently asked other children (almost always girls) to help boys clean up.

In another classroom, the teachers had boys do push-ups when they were physically fighting or being aggressive with their classmates. The teacher would ask the boys involved to take a break, come to the middle of the classroom, and do five push-ups. This teacher held gendered expectations for children’s behavior. She viewed boys as having physical energy they needed to release, and she implemented a gendered disciplinary practice (push-ups) to accommodate what she perceived as a behavioral “need” for preschool-aged boys. By contrast, in all nine

classrooms, teachers immediately sent girls to timeout or moved them to a different play activity when they engaged in physical behaviors.

Freeing children from boy vs girl discipline creates stronger individuals.

Beginning in preschool, disciplinary interactions between teachers and students guide the construction of gender difference in young children. Gendered expectations and differential treatment of children at the young ages of three to five years old create and maintain gender inequality by constructing gender differences as natural, normal, and unchangeable. Perhaps if we change our gendered expectations and disciplinary responses to boys' and girls' behaviors in various contexts, such as at home and in school, we will open the door for children's identities to be shaped in more individualized, and less gendered, ways.

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Parenting and the Gender Trap

A briefing paper prepared by Emily W. Kane, Bates College, for the Council on Contemporary Families Families' [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf).

Despite [fifty years of significant change](#) in gender relations, social definitions of good parenting remain so deeply gender-based that we still think of mothering and fathering as very different activities, and we continue to valorize white, upper-middle class, heterosexually-partnered mothering and fathering. The gender of our kids also plays a pivotal role in how we parent them, a [trap](#) we continue to fall into even though many parents want to loosen gender constraints on their sons and daughters. All these patterns take place in the context of an increasingly privatized family, with each American household expected to do the hard work of raising the next generation with less public support than in the past, and much less than in other affluent industrialized democracies.

Adaptations to pressures from everyday life.

The [transition to parenthood](#) still leads to inequality in the division of household labor between mothers and fathers. Women take on more hours of housework and child care as well as coping with the expectations of “intensive motherhood.” Parenthood also heightens the gender wage gap for women, because their earnings are hit by what social scientists call a “[motherhood penalty](#).”

These gender inequalities are not so much the result of choices made based on personal preferences as they are adaptations to pressures from the everyday world and the lack of institutional support for shared care-giving and breadwinning from employers and government. The most economically privileged families can buy themselves out of some of these constraints by outsourcing household labor and child care, often to poorly-paid women of color, sometimes undocumented immigrants. In these privileged families, heterosexual partners lessen gender inequalities by taking advantage of intertwined inequalities of race, class, and gender elsewhere in the population.

Intersections between inequalities of gender, race, and class.

Focusing only on the work-family issues of economically advantaged, heterosexually partnered families leaves out the vast majority of parents, from single parents to LGBTQ parents, from low-income parents to non-residential parents, and from transnational parents to incarcerated parents, all of whom face similar constraints from gender expectations that are compounded by other intersecting inequalities. The inadequate levels of public support available to low-income women raising children on public assistance force them to operate with “[both hands tied](#).” Non-residential fathers in low-income neighborhoods face stereotypes about “dead-beat dads” even as they struggle to “[do the best they can](#).” [Incarcerated mothers](#) are vilified with little recognition of the social factors that contribute to their problems and little support offered to help them establish more secure lives for themselves and their children. African-American mothers [navigate treacherous terrain](#) as they try to protect their sons from dangerous racist stereotypes about Black masculinity. [Immigrant domestic workers](#) try to offer emotional as well as material support to children left behind in their home countries as they care for the children of affluent American families. Meanwhile, diminished public services and a declining safety net leave individual American families “[cut adrift](#)” to survive on their own, a trend that burdens families

across the economic spectrum but leaves low-income households especially vulnerable, widening inequalities in the educational and enrichment activities to which children have access.

At the same time that these gender and other inequalities shape the work of parents, children's gender also shapes the way we parent. My research demonstrates that even the many parents who want a less gender-constrained world for their kids often find themselves [trapped into reproducing gender patterns](#) in the way they raise their sons and daughters, with particularly limiting expectations placed on sons. At the same time, scholars are beginning to document the paths forged by [parents of transgender children](#), as they follow their children's lead in new and less constrained directions.

Parents and children in the contemporary United States face a range of limitations, including gender-based expectations, economic inequalities, and other inequities based on race, sexuality, and citizenship status. Individual families need the kind of collective support that can allow us all to contribute to the socially critical work of raising the next generation with fewer constraints. The scholarship reviewed in my [Handbook](#) chapter, "Parenting and Gender," helps chart a path toward that greater public support and more equitable, inclusive possibilities.

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August 8, 2018

Gender, Race, and Girls in California's Alternative Schools

A briefing paper prepared by Kenly Brown, University of California, Berkeley, for the Council on Contemporary Families' [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf).

Since the 1970s and early 1980s, feminist criminologists have explored the ways in which the distribution of justice and punishment varies, based on people's marginalized (or privileged) identities, their vulnerability to state violence, and their exposure to interpersonal violence ([Potter, 2015](#); [Riche, 2012](#); [Chesney-Lind, 2006](#) ; [Burgess-Proctor, 2006](#); [Bertrand, 1969](#); [Heidensohn, 1968](#)). In my chapter with Berkeley's Nikki Jones, "Gender, Race, and Crime: The Evolution of a Feminist Research Agenda," in the [Handbook of the Sociology of Gender](#), we argue that feminist scholars must "examine the relationship between interpersonal violence and institutional violence, as well as the feminist movement's relationship to the state" (p.456). Ultimately, institutional violence shapes the conditions and outcomes of the interpersonal violence that marginalized groups navigate on a daily basis.

In my study, [The Disciplinary Dumping Ground: The Construction of Black Girlhood in an Alternative School](#), I use a similar intersectional analysis to study the ways in which alternative education creates inequitable conditions of learning and access for Black girls who are vulnerable to exclusion, neglect, and violence in their everyday lives. I extend literature on exclusionary discipline (i.e. disproportionate levels of harsh punishment sanctioned against Black and Latinx students) to consider the significance of *exclusionary spaces* in education: alternative schools.

Benign intent, harmful result.

California has seven types of alternative schools: independent charter, community, juvenile court, opportunity, school of choice, community day, and continuation. Continuation schools enroll 75 percent of the 136,000 students enrolled in alternative schools, ostensibly providing a more positive environment for students who have difficulty learning in large school settings, are at-risk to not graduate, and/or have disruptive behavioral issues ([Taylor, 2015](#) & [Velasco and Gonzales, 2017](#)). Despite this benign intent, teachers, students, and practitioners colloquially refer to alternative schools as *dumping grounds* used to warehouse students of color from under-resourced neighborhoods that traditional high schools find disruptive and/or underperforming ([Dunning-Lozano, 2016](#); [Kelly, 1993](#)). Indeed, Elder's qualitative research found that continuation schools were less like a learning community than a correctional institution for students stigmatized as "outsiders" -- academically failing, on parole, pregnant, and /or working ([Elder, 1966](#)).

My research explores how alternative schools contribute to the further isolation of marginalized students, particularly low-income Black girls, who are the most vulnerable to violence and neglect in their interpersonal lives. Studies have shown that Black girls are perceived as less innocent than white girls and are more harshly punished in school for not meeting mainstream expectations of middle-class white girls ([Epstein, Blake, and González, 2017](#)). Using ethnographic methods including direct and participant observations and semi-structured interviews, I find that the compounding effects of isolation, neglect, and danger in low-income communities render Black girls more vulnerable to be pushed into learning environments that are

also isolated, lack stable funding, and have limited resources. An intersectional vulnerabilities framework shows how stereotypes associated with Black girls and women perceived as aggressive, domineering, or hypersexual increase their exposure to interpersonal violence in their everyday day lives and structural violence at the hands of institutions.

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August 8, 2018

The Push and Pull of Sex, Gender, and Aging

A briefing paper prepared by Nicholas Velotta and Pepper Schwartz, University of Washington, for the Council on Contemporary Families' [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf).

Not too long ago, women were considered “over the hill” once they reached middle age. Women in the 1960s recalled being told that their fate was to be ["fat at 40, finished at 50."](#) But over the last two decades the U.S. has seen a massive shift in older adults' attitudes towards sex, romance, and intimacy, with women in particular feeling emboldened to remain sexually and romantically satisfied throughout their *entire* life cycle, not just when they are young. Heterosexual partners tend to become more egalitarian as they age, and the majority of divorces that do occur after age 50 are initiated by women. Matchmaking sites have given older women far more chances to find partners than in the past, while men can now take Viagra or Cialis in order to keep their sex lives vibrant and healthy.

Desexualized? Who is on the hook for cosmetic surgery?

There are challenges of course, and many of those challenges are starkly gendered. After menopause, women are frequently seen as non-sexual beings, something we call the *desexualization* of older women. Men on the other hand have been given lifelong statuses as sexual beings and seldom face societal obstacles to romantic contact later in life. To compensate for this gender double standard, many women have resorted to surgical interventions to reduce the signs of age on their body—in fact, they make up the largest growing market for cosmetic surgery. Other women have decided to forgo relationships and sex entirely, relying on social networks of friends to support them emotionally instead of intimate partners. Fortunately for the many women who continue to date later in life, the research concludes that their sexual satisfaction and frequencies are fairly high.

Resexualized. Stars might suggest older faces that are sexy.

What our review, “Gender and Sexuality in Aging,” in the [Handbook of the Sociology of Gender](#), best illustrates is that Baby Boomers have become far more liberal in regard to sex, and when older men and women prioritize lifelong sexual satisfaction they have a better shot at achieving it today than ever before. Gender, sexual orientation, race, and other demographic factors affect Boomers' success at this, and U.S. culture as a whole is just beginning to value intimacy as a lifelong goal. But with older faces becoming “sexy” (think Alfre Woodard at 65, Meryl Streep at 69. Or Denzel Washington at 63, Tom Selleck at 73) and more attention being given to the study of sex and aging (see the endowed [professorship in sexuality and aging](#) at the University of Minnesota), we are seeing progressive shifts in our mainstream culture towards making older bodies less stigmatized and more romanticized.

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August 8, 2018

Housewife Visas and Highly Skilled Immigrant Families in the U.S.

A briefing paper prepared by Pallavi Banerjee, University of Calgary, for the Council on Contemporary Families' [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf).

Imagine thousands of highly qualified women forced to stay home because they are not legally allowed to work. Sounds unreal in this day and age, right? And yet this has been the reality for many women who have legally migrated to the US on what are popularly known as dependent visas or H-4 visas. These are visas given to spouses and children of workers who migrate to the U.S. on H-1B visas to work in a “specialty occupation,” mostly in science, technology and engineering fields. The H-4 dependent visa forbids the spouse of a skilled worker to engage in legal employment for a term that could be as long as 20 years. These visas disproportionately affect Asian migrant families in the U.S., given that more half of the H-1B and H-4 visas go to Indians, followed by Chinese.

Dependent H-4 visas were originally designed with women in mind, as the extension of the 18th-19th century coverture doctrine that a wife had no legal identity outside that of her husband. The doctrine was generally accepted until the late 20th century in accord with the male-breadwinner ideology of the 1950s in the US. However, the law in itself is not gendered. This means that men as well as women *can* be excluded from the labor market if they come in with a spouse who is on an H-1B visa. In practice, women are the majority of those affected. But either way, these policies leave lasting imprints, although in distinctly gendered ways, on the lives of spouses who come in with one H-1B and one H-4 visa holder. Families where the woman is dependent on the man have to live like 1950s nuclear families, even though many women are qualified to be co-providers and would prefer to be. In families where the man is excluded from the labor force, by contrast, gender power struggles within the families assume difficult and complex forms, generating ambivalence in both the working and the stay-at-home spouse.

Trailing wives and the reinvention of dependence.

Because the most common recipients of H-1B visas are male high-tech workers, women (their wives) are disproportionally affected by these policies. Approximately 80 percent of all H-4 visa holders are women, most of whom are highly-educated and were working before migration. A “housewife visa” or “vegetable visa,” as many of the dependent wives call the H-4 visa, forces these wives to become economically, socially, and psychologically dependent on husbands. My interviews with these women revealed that they experienced a loss of dignity and an increase in self-deprecation. They tried to cope by engaging in excessive cooking, cleaning, and decorating while also resenting it. These women told me they felt they were back in the days of the “traditional family” where women had no identity of their own and were devalued in society. They talked about being rendered invisible and feeling shackled and depressed. Some even reported contemplating suicide. In situations of domestic violence, women in such circumstances have no means to leave and support themselves. Accordingly, some women describe these visas as “prison visas.”

Trailing husbands and the loss of status.

Relatively few men are on the H-4 visas, and typically these are the husbands of women who were granted work visas because of their training as nurses. Such men report a complicated relationship with their dependent status. While most claim to enjoy raising children as an equal caregiver with their wives, the loss of their culturally normalized head-of-household status leaves them sore and resentful. In order to compensate for this loss, dependent husbands find multiple ways to reassert their masculinities. For instance, they emphasize how they “allowed” their wives to be the main migrant. They also skirt around doing any of the everyday housework and control the family finances, while invoking the imagery of the “sacrificial father” who gave up his career “to ensure the well-being of the children and family.” Meanwhile, the breadwinning wives overcompensate for being the breadwinner by doing all household chores.

Executive Orders from Obama to Trump.

In 2015 Obama responded to research and a spurt of online activism around the issue of legal dependence by signing an Executive Order that made it possible for H-4 visa holders to obtain Employment Authorization Documents *after* being approved for permanent residency. H-4 visa holders without permanent residency approval remained stranded. But the EO did have positive effects on the lives of 179,600 spouses that year, and 55,000 additional spouses in subsequent years, as estimated by USCIS. Many H-4 visa holders attempted to return to work. Some with specialized degrees found work quickly. Others found it difficult to find jobs, as is common for women with a long employment hiatus. However, what was important is now they had the opportunity to look for work legally.

The Trump administration, by contrast, has announced its intent has to implement the Buy American and Hire American Executive Order. This will revoke the employment authorization for H-4 visa holders, threatening economic and family stability for many and perpetuating gendered dependencies and conflicts within and outside the families. These apparently gender-neutral visa policies harm women and men alike, by imposing either a male breadwinner family that subordinates women or a female breadwinner family that leads to ambivalence, resentment and conflict.

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August 8, 2018

Separating Migrant Families, as Practiced around the Globe

A briefing paper prepared by Maria Cecilia Hwang, Rice University; Carolyn Choi, University of Southern California; and Rhacel Parreñas, University of Southern California, for the Council on Contemporary Families' [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf).

The Trump administration's policy of separating immigrant children from their parents has generated wide public opposition, with the United Nations condemning the practice as a violation of the rights of a child. Yet family separation is a central feature of international temporary labor migration policies that promote the recruitment of migrant workers but bar them from migrating with their families.

As we explain in the [Handbook](#) in “Women on the Move: Stalled Gender Revolution in Global Migration,” family separation across international borders and vast distances has become the norm for many migrant workers across the globe. In the Philippines, around 25 percent of children live apart from one or both parents while in Moldova, approximately 31 percent of children under the age of 15 are left behind by both parents. Temporary migrant workers make up half the world's migrant population, but most are classified as “unskilled” and therefore often categorically disqualified from sponsoring their families. This policy affects temporary migrants globally, including construction workers in the Middle East; farm workers in Canada, United States, and European countries; factory workers in South Korea and Taiwan; and domestic workers across the Middle East and Asia. As a result, in the absence of jobs back home, temporary migrant workers are forced to leave their children in order to earn a living for their families.

When Moms Migrate.

Globally, men and women migrate at almost the same rate, but family separation affects women in distinctive ways that reinforce gender inequality. Because societies idealize mothers as the primary caretakers of their children, migrant mothers are often vilified for abandoning their children. For instance, a [New York Times article](#) described the migration of Romanian women as a “national tragedy,” blaming women for the demise of the Romanian family and children's delinquency.

In addition, the responsibility for maintaining transnational families often rests on women. Even when fathers are left behind with children as mothers seek employment in other countries, it is generally an extended network of women, including female kin and local domestic workers, who provide most of the childcare back home. As a result, family separation creates what has been called the international division of reproductive labor, meaning the global transfer of reproductive labor from one group of women to another group of women with lesser means. As depicted in the documentary [Chain of Love](#), women from developing countries such as the Philippines leave their own children in order to financially provide for their families by assuming the childcare responsibilities of women in more affluent developed countries; in turn, older daughters, extended female relatives, or paid local domestic workers in the home country care for children who are left behind. This transfer of care not only reinforces gender inequality but also exacerbates hierarchies among women.

Finally, maintaining split-apart families from a long distance is a double burden for women. Not only are they expected to provide financially for their families even while paying for their own subsistence in the host countries, but advancements in telecommunication technologies have also created greater expectations for migrant mothers to provide emotional care and affirm selfless commitment to their children's well-being from afar through telephone calls, SMS messages, and Skype calls. This can be especially difficult given time zone differences. These caregiving expectations do not generally apply to migrant fathers, whose responsibilities to their children continue to be judged by their ability to financially provide for their families.

No end in sight.

The separation of migrant families is likely to continue. The International Organization for Migration has called for the global expansion of temporary labor migration programs, championing these programs as “win-win-win” situations: Supposedly, migrant workers gain higher earnings; destination countries fill labor deficits in areas of work shunned by their citizens; and origin countries ease their unemployment problem and benefit from remittances. Ironically, however, this triple “win” will result not only in more children being separated from their parents but also in increased gender inequality as women are still expected to care for transnational families. Women will continue to be burdened with the responsibility of mothering from a distance and in a different time zone, while women who stay in the home country must devote more time in providing care for left-behind children.

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August 8, 2018

Combating Gender Bias in Modern Workplaces

A briefing paper prepared by Alison T. Wynn and Shelley J. Correll, Stanford University, for the Council on Contemporary Families' [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf).

Research consistently shows that unconscious or implicit gender biases systematically hinder women's advancement in the workplace. Such biases operate outside of conscious awareness, which makes them particularly difficult to detect and combat. Even people who are not explicitly sexist or racist are susceptible to subtle, unconscious biases, such as weighing a man's opinion as more credible than a woman's, which can unconsciously affect our judgments and, ultimately, the rewards men and women earn in settings like workplaces.

In recent years, organizations have become interested in reducing these biases by training their employees. For example, in the wake of an incident where employees called the police on two Black customers for actions that were ignored when engaged in by white customers, [Starbucks recently closed its 8,000 U.S. stores](#) to provide unconscious bias trainings to its 175,000 employees.

While unconscious bias trainings are an important first step, research finds that organizations must do more if they want to produce sustainable change. Unconscious bias trainings, while helpful, can wear off over time, or can even risk exacerbating bias by painting it as something normal and unavoidable. Specifically, organizations must alter the conditions that are known to enable and exacerbate bias.

The Small Wins Model.

At the [Clayman Institute](#) for Gender Research at Stanford University, researchers are collaborating with companies to engage in such change efforts. Using a "[small wins model](#)" of organizational change, we first educate employees about unconscious bias and then work with them to develop and assess new processes and tools to get beyond bias.

For example, at one large technology company, we collaborated with managers to improve gender equality. When we began our work, the company had a less-than-stellar reputation for gender equality and no consistent performance management process in place. Through a targeted intervention, we worked with managers to reduce the ambiguity in their performance assessment processes, since ambiguity is known to exacerbate bias. Research has found that when the criteria for evaluation are not clearly defined or spelled out, they leave room for unconscious biases to have a particularly robust impact on people's judgments. In our intervention, managers developed new clear, measurable criteria to assess employees; ensured that the same criteria were being applied to all employees; and allotted equal amounts of time for discussing each employee during their calibration meetings. Prior to these changes, women were more likely than men to receive criticisms about their personality, and they were more likely to have their performance ratings downgraded in calibration meetings. After the intervention, these differences were no longer significant.

These small wins inspired other changes at the company, including reworking their job ads to be more appealing to women and other groups. Today, half the entry-level engineers hired are women, and the company has since been named one of the top workplaces for women in tech.

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Gender, Tech Jobs, and Hidden Biases that Make a Difference

A briefing paper prepared by Koji Chavez, Indiana University, for the Council on Contemporary Families' [Gender Matters Online Symposium](#) (.pdf).

In 2014, leading high technology companies in Silicon Valley began releasing the gender breakdowns of their technical and leadership positions. First Google, then LinkedIn, and then Yahoo, and so on. The numbers revealed what we all expected: Women are vastly underrepresented in many of these organizations' technical and leadership roles. But focusing on the gender composition of employees or among new hires is just the first step in understanding how gender “works” at work and how to address it. Here I want to highlight a few nuanced ways in which gender plays out in the hiring process.

What do we already know about gender and hiring?

First, we need to appreciate how few women enter the software engineering profession in the first place. In school, stereotypes that women are not as good as men in math and science discourage women from following a technical career path. Women, for instance, [underestimate their own technical ability compared to men](#) and [have less confidence that they could be successful engineers](#), both of which lead women away from the software engineering profession. In 2015, only [12.9](#) percent of engineers were women.

These “supply side” problems, however, do not mean that employers and organizations who hire men and women are off the hook. Research shows that employers and recruiters [sort men and women into gendered roles](#) and [penalize women, especially mothers](#), at least in the initial screening stages. [Higher socioeconomic status](#) and education do not seem to advantage women seeking entry into elite fields as much as they do men.

Gender also influences hiring in even more subtle ways, as I have learned in my study of software engineering hiring at a mid-sized high technology firm. At this firm, I find no gender difference in the probability of receiving a job offer once applicants pass the recruiter phone screen. Pretty good, right? But if we look more closely at the process by which men and women get through the initial screening, and the *reasons* they are hired after they do, we find that gender still skews the hiring process in important ways.

Outsourcing bias.

For one thing, gender bias does not always originate within the bounds of an organization. It may originate in other organizations on which the [firm relies](#). To wit: a common practice is for firms to contract contingency recruitment firms to supplement their applicant pool. This inter-firm reliance can introduce what I call “outsourced bias”: A firm itself may not be gendered biased per se, but by relying on another biased firm, gender bias seeps into the hiring process, often unbeknownst (or at least conveniently unbeknownst) to the firm. When bias originates in another organization on which a firm relies, employers may contribute to gender inequality in hiring without knowing that they are doing it, and without taking responsibility for addressing it.

Even when a firm does attract female candidates and hires them at the same rate as men, another even more subtle bias often creeps in. My research suggests that decision makers tend to hire

male engineers more for their perceived technical skills and female engineers more for their perceived “people” skills. In other words, gender stereotypes inform the very reasons men and women are hired for the same position. The main point is this: Gender influences not only who gets hired but what they get hired for – with potential long-term consequences for people’s careers. If men and women are hired for the same job, but men are seen as good at the technical aspects of that job and women good at the social aspects, no wonder we see women [getting funneled into more “people” focused positions and men into more technical](#) (typically higher paying) ones once in the organization.

In sociology, we think of gender as a fundamental structure of inequality, meaning that it frames how we think about others and ourselves, how we structure our institutions and lives, and how we interact with one another. Gender permeates the social world. It is no surprise that in a fundamentally social process like hiring we find gender exerting its influence in subtle and surprising ways. So, if we are serious about attacking women’s underrepresentation in tech, it is important for academics and employers alike to understand the nuanced ways that gender influences who gets hire and why.

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For Further Information

Stephanie Coontz and Virginia Rutter convened and edited this symposium. They are available for further information.

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About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based at the University of Texas, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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