THE FUTURE OF GENDER ROLES:

Are we moving toward 2050 or 1950?

Stephanie Shook, University of Houston

Video Link: https://youtu.be/Aj8VMrJX5Vg

The accompanying video illustrates a pitch to a company at its long-term planning retreat. The intent is to explain and promote the importance of the foresight practice and offer a pitch for action to support the company's future health.

Click here to view video.

BACKGROUND: CURRENT CONDITIONS

- Research has shown that being a mother can reduce women's earnings, while fatherhood can increase men's earnings. (link)

- Although women have made great strides in politics, men are still leading. This year's Congress was the first in 15 years in which the number of females was not higher than the one before it. (link)

- About three-in-10 Republican men (31%) believe women's gains have come at the expense of men, compared with 16% each among Democratic men and Republican women, and 9% of Democratic women. (link)

- Lots of discussion around masculinity has spread from podcasts, including Mark Zuckerberg's plea for more "masculine energy" in companies. (link)

- Netflix announced that "Adolescence" was its top-streamed series of the year so far, a series that drew significant attention for its plot about a 13-year-old boy who's immersed in the "manosphere" and murders a female classmate. (link)

BACKGROUND: POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS

- **Political campaign strategists** – It's important to understand Americans' sentiment around gender roles.
- **Content creators** (movies, books, TV, etc.) – It's important for them to understand Americans' sentiment and show representation of what's common today.
- **Travel & leisure companies** – They can adapt marketing targets as women begin to have more control of household earnings.
- **Financial planners** – As women increase their earnings, financial planners will need to develop strategies for women, rather than focus on men.
- **City planners** – Communities are often designed for men, at the expense of women. (link)
- **Parents** – Changing perceptions of gender roles may change the way parents raise their children.
- **Church/Spiritual organizations** – Organized religion is splintering around gender roles, divided by politics.

BACKGROUND: RECENT HISTORY

- **November 8, 2016** – America chooses to elect Donald Trump as president over Hilary Clinton. Trump and his loyalists often portray traditional roles of masculinity as part of what makes them strong. (link)

- **October 2017** – The #MeToo movement goes viral as women globally shared their experiences with sexual assault. Although this was a defining moment of power for women, a backlash took shape that aimed to protect the patriarchy. (link)

- **August 2, 2018** – TikTok debuts in America. The social media app has significantly shaped American culture as more youth turn to the app for news and entertainment. Trends like #TradWives, #BamaRush and #Looksmaxxing are packaged as entertainment but contain complicated perspectives on gender roles. (link) (link)

- **January 20, 2025** – The president signs the Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government executive order. It aims to defend women's rights by protecting them from "gender ideology extremism;" however, it also attacks trans rights and progressive gender norms. (link)

BACKGROUND: TIPPOS - TRENDS

Communities:

- Women living in rural areas face numerous barriers to health care contributing to higher rates of unintended pregnancy, poorer infant and maternal outcomes, and lower rates of pap tests in rural areas. Rural women of color often experience disproportionately worse outcomes. (link)

- Post-Covid, intentional communities have increased in popularity, in part because of rising housing costs and a growing epidemic of loneliness. In these communities, which may be formed around sustainability, LGBTQIA+ identification, female identities, etc., childcare and household responsibilities may look different than in traditional households. **(link)**

Media:

- A growing number of young males and females are watching content from “trad wives” and alpha male influencers on TikTok. In one study, 31% of 13-39-year-olds watch trad wives (homesteading, traditional housewives) content on social media, while 29% of 13-39-year-olds watch alpha male/sigma male content on social media (looksmaxxing, gym bro content, etc.).

- 60% of married adults agree that TV and movie plots often keep men and women in their traditional gender roles, while 47% of unmarried adults agree. (link)

BACKGROUND: TIPPOS - TRENDS

Identity:

- A recent NBC News survey identified a wide gap in how men and women define success. Gen Z men who voted for Trump in the last election rated having children as the most-important thing in their personal definition of success.

- Gen Z women who voted for Harris ranked having children as the second-least important thing in their personal definition of success.

- Men and women who voted for Harris are more likely to include a fulfilling job and using their talents and resources to help others in their definitions of success.

- Men and women who voted for Trump are more likely to list financial independence, having children and being spiritually grounded on their lists of what defines success. (link)

Demographics

- Republicans have become more likely to agree that "what it means to be a man has changed, and I don't think that has been good for society." About three-fourths of both Republican men and Republican women endorse this view. (link)

BACKGROUND: TIPPOS - TRENDS

Demographics (continued)

- About 40% of men in an Equimundo study reported having committed, satisfactory relationships. At the same time, many men in the youngest group – around three in 10 – said they are unable to find partners or have stopped looking for an intimate relationship. The study's authors draw a connection to this lack of relationship satisfaction and the rise of porn and masturbation among younger men, as 48% said their online lives are more engaging and rewarding than their offline lives. (link)

Jobs

- As of August, 9.1% of men ages 20-24 are unemployed, compared to just 7.2% of women, a gap that's persisted since the pandemic. As more women funnel into AI-proof industries like health care, men are still on the hunt for jobs in tech and financial services slowly being overtaken by automation. (link)

- Women are more likely than men to say that society is not accepting enough of men who take on roles typically associated with women (49% vs. 36%), while men are more likely than women to say acceptance is about right (43% vs. 33%). In addition, a higher share of women than men say society is not accepting enough of women who take on roles usually associated with men (53% vs. 35%). Again, men are much more likely than women to say things are about right (42% vs. 30%). (link)

- Amid a wider slowdown in hiring, the unemployment rate for men ages 23-30 with bachelor's degrees has jumped in recent months to 6% — compared with 3.5% for young women with the same level of education. (link)

BACKGROUND: TIPPOS - TRENDS

Goods & Services

- A study found that “marketing materials often employ gender roles and stereotypes through colors, characteristics of the actors using the toy, the way they play with the toy, and the type of emotional experience associated with play. Parents are responsive to this marketing and can reinforce gender stereotypes through both the toys they purchase for their children and the types of play they encourage and discourage.”

- Toys marketed to girls were 18 times more likely to be shown demonstrating nurturing or domestic skills than toys marketed to boys.

- About 75% of toys that were played competitively or violently were played with by boys. (link)

BACKGROUND: TIPPOS - CURRENT & EMERGING ISSUES

- Self-described Christian nationalist pastor Douglas Wilson is a religious leader whose supporters include Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. Will Wilson's effort to expand his following be successful, especially as people like Hegseth help raise awareness of his church? Will more people endorse Wilson's belief that women should not have the right to vote, especially as he plans to build more churches? How will this impact gender roles if the man of the house is the one to vote on behalf of the household? (link)

- While a majority of Americans believe that sexual misconduct, harassment and abuse are systemic social problems, many also believe that "boys will be boys." Are men naturally promiscuous and sexually aggressive, and are women inherently reluctant? Are these patterns inherited traits, learned behavior or both? (link)

- Would traditional gender roles make the world better or worse? Most people believe in traditional gender roles. But those have been shifting for decades and today this is more of a 50/50 split for those under age 35. Women have reinvented their role, pushing the glass ceiling higher and sometimes breaking through. Men, it can be argued, are not adjusting as well. If men believe it's not in their best interest to enhance gender equality, can it be achieved? (link)

- A crisis among men is simmering. Many, especially younger men, are socially disconnected, pessimistic about the future and turning to online anger. Younger men are facing higher rates of depressive symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and a sense of isolation, as seen in the agreement of 65% who said, "no one really knows me well." New York University professor Scott Galloway said, "There's just not a lot of empathy for a group that historically has had advantages and are naturally more likely and prone to be oppressors than the oppressed." Are Americans ready to shift their view and recognize that males need more help as society has changed? (link) (link)

BACKGROUND: TIPPOS - PLANS & PROJECTIONS

Plans:

- All New Mexico residents will have access to free childcare beginning this November. It will be the first state in the nation to remove income eligibility requirements from its childcare assistance program and waive all family copayments. (link)

- The Trump administration announced that it's considering proposals to encourage Americans to marry and have children. Proposals include reserving 30% of scholarships for the Fulbright program for applicants who are married or have children, giving a $5,000 cash "baby bonus" to mothers after delivery, and establishing funding for programs that educate women on their menstrual cycles — in part so they can better understand when they are ovulating and able to conceive. (link)

Projections:

- Gender equality, one of 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, is considered a very long-term future. At the rate of progress as of 2023, it would take an estimated 300 years to end child marriage, 286 years to close gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws, 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership in the workplace, and 47 years to achieve equal representation in national parliaments. Political leadership, investments and comprehensive policy reforms are needed to dismantle systemic barriers to achieving Goal 5 Gender equality. (link)

BACKGROUND: TIPPOS - OBSTACLES

- **Unconscious bias** – Beliefs about gender roles are often deep-rooted and difficult to change. In the workplace, stereotypes and bias can keep people out of positions for which they are qualified. (link)

- **Cultural norms and practices** – Expectations of arranged marriage can challenge women who prefer to delay marriage and/or focus on a career. (link)

BACKGROUND: DRIVERS

DRIVER NAME	DESCRIPTION	SUPPORTING RESEARCH
1.States' rights	• Even within the US, where you live geographically may impact beliefs and perceptions of gender roles. • More people are moving to regions based on the rights afforded to those residents.	• Women in rural areas often face challenges getting health care, which can impact job opportunities. • Intentional communities can set its own "rules" for gender roles. • Choose New Jersey" billboard campaign promotes "Laws that protect women's rights" along with best education system and #1 ranked place to live – a signal of political real estate.

BACKGROUND: DRIVERS

DRIVER NAME	DESCRIPTION	SUPPORTING RESEARCH

2. What's masculine?	• Conflicting perceptions of masculinity are shifting perceptions of gender roles.
	
	• Confusion and dissent are rising around gender roles and what makes a man masculine.
	  ◦ Emerging masculinity is more fluid
	  ◦ Interest in more traditional masculinity is also rising
		• Mark Zuckerberg's plea for more "masculine energy" in companies sparks debate.
		• Charlie Kirk's Turning Point USA preaches traditional gender roles, attracting lots of Gen Z on college campuses.
		• About 75% of toys played competitively or violently were played with by boys.
		• Is the "Boys will be boys" argument ingrained in society? Does this endorse men as aggressive and women as reluctant, a traditional stereotype of gender roles?
		• In Senegal, men are taking empathy classes and learning more about supporting women and their health.

BACKGROUND: DRIVERS

DRIVER NAME	DESCRIPTION	SUPPORTING RESEARCH
3. **Political gender divide**	• The gaps between men and women, as well as Republicans and Democrats, are widening in the way they think about gender roles. In some cases, the gaps are larger than the ones between household income or age categories. • This is illustrating clear differences in what's important to men and women.	• More Republicans agree that "what it means to be a man has changed, and I don't think that has been good for society." • Gen Z women who voted for Kamala Harris ranked having children as the second-least important thing in their personal definition of success, while Gen Z men who voted for Trump rated having children as the most-important thing in their personal definition of success. • Christian nationalist pastor Douglas Wilson believes each American household should have one vote in elections, and the man of the house should cast that vote, leaving women without any right to cast a ballot.

BACKGROUND: DRIVERS

DRIVER NAME	DESCRIPTION	SUPPORTING RESEARCH
4. **Women Are the New Face of Wealth**	• Data shows that women are making great strides in education and their careers, sometimes outpacing men. At the same time, America is anticipating an imminent great wealth transfer to Boomer-age women.	• Women are outnumbering men at four-year schools and have higher graduation rates than men. • More college-educated women are in the work force than men. • As of August, 9.1% of men ages 20-24 are unemployed, compared to just 7.2% of women, a gap that's persisted since the pandemic. • Women control about one-third of all retail financial assets in the European Union and United States, and this share is expected to rise to 40-45% by 2030.

BACKGROUND: DRIVERS

DRIVER NAME	DESCRIPTION	SUPPORTING RESEARCH
5. **Targeting by gender**	• Goods like toys and clothing are becoming more gender-neutral, while the marketing of services, like travel, are targeting men and women specifically, based on gender needs.	• Marketing materials often employ gender roles and stereotypes through colors, characteristics of the actors using the toy, the way they play with the toy, and the type of emotional experience associated with play. • Parents often reinforce gender stereotypes by the types of toys they purchase and the behavior they allow when their kids play. In one study, about 75% of toys that were played competitively or violently were played with by boys.(link) • About 75% of parents believe that the current toy marketing is gender-specific, but 70% think it shouldn't be. (link) • Rise of solo travel, especially among women, as well as "solo-ish" travel that promotes a safe environment for solo women. (link) (link)

BACKGROUND: SCENARIOS

Baseline:
A Kinder, Gentler Polarization

When the nation broke down, two separate regions were established. Women had the wealth, education and power to begin taking control and designing a new region. There, marriage rates and child births remain depressed. The population decline is impacting the labor market. Because there's such an intense need for nurses and caregivers for the growing senior population, there are just as many males as females in the industry.

AI has replaced most traditionally low-paying jobs, and the college-educated population (the majority of which are women) have the highest employment rate.

A more stereotypical feminine leadership style has led to a realignment of values that prioritizes kindness, empathy, inclusion, joy, self-expression and art, which reflects society's embrace of a a more thoughtful approach to life. Gen Alpha's embrace of acceptance and fluidity has helped solidify an environment in which people are free to express themselves.

Conservative citizens embrace a mindset tied to religion and traditional values, but extremism has been mostly replaced by a more moderate outlook.

BACKGROUND: SCENARIOS

Transformation:

Reconstruct Without Construct

After a tumultuous period, an era has emerged in which citizens seek to rebuild what collapsed in society. The need for connection and belonging is critically important to citizens, and most Americans recognize that the vitriol in the 2020s destroyed the country's foundation.

Today, there is a deep desire to "live and let live." A majority of citizens recognize sex and gender as two separate things. People mostly feel free to live as they choose, especially in big cities. Some disagree and continue to fight for traditional values from the 1900s, but the bitterness has faded.

There is a resurgence in travel and leisure, especially international touring, as consumers are hungry to establish a wider base of experiences for transformational and social capital reasons.

Brands that were burned for seemingly siding with