

# Growing Flexibility in Gender Roles of Men and Women

---

## POINTS TO DEVELOP

Early concept of definite division of roles for men and women.

Change leading to flexibility has several reasons economic and social.

Slow breakdown of joint family system is a factor.

Changing roles not a smooth process.

Changing needs of the time has helped flexibility to grow in gender roles.

This flexibility evident in urban rather than rural areas.

The changing roles should be accepted and encouraged.

TRANSITION in social milieu has always been a universal factor which reverberates in the vicissitudes of the society. Changes in a particular field have an impact in other realms of the society too. A brilliant example of such change is that of the growing flexibility in gender roles of men and women.

Early society had rigid roles for men and women. Characteristics and attributes were labelled as being masculine or feminine. Man was the hunter and provider of basic necessities for family, and woman, the child-bearer and caretaker. Till very recently, women were accorded the role of the inferior sex and the prized possession of man, the master.

The flexibility in gender roles that we are witnessing today has its roots in the changing social structure. Economic factors, advancement in medical sciences and changed value systems have contributed to a preference for a nuclear family, thus doing away with the large demanding structures of joint families. Consequently, the ambit of economic and household responsibilities has changed.

Earlier, in the joint family system, there was, by and large, a clear-cut division of responsibilities or duties, with the women looking after the domestic matters and the men taking charge of financial matters. Today, the nuclear system allows for no such demarcation-the man is no longer the sole bread-earner and the woman no longer a mere caretaker of the house.

The flexibility in gender roles has been mainly the result of economic compulsion. With the financial security provided by a joint family system no longer available and with the cost of living ever increasing, there arose a need for an extra earning member to supplement the financial resources brought in by the man of the family. The woman was thus required to earn as well so that the domestic demands could be met. In the initial stages of this phase, the woman member was offered no help in domestic affairs. In fact, she performed both the supplementary role of an earning member and her 'natural' role of a housewife. Gradually, over generations, the attitude of men softened to a certain extent such that a woman's role was adopted by the man at least when compulsion to do so arose.

The changes in demographic, cultural, macro and micro economic patterns vis-a-vis responsibilities and duties of men and women have been hardly smooth, rather, they have been accompanied by strife and contention.

While the acceptance of man's gender role has been willingly and uncomplainingly taken up by women, the same does not always hold true for men. The present scenario is such that while a woman is groomed to become an efficient career-woman as well as an efficient housemaker, men are expected to excel mainly in professional fields.

The predicament is that while any effort from men to undertake a domestic job is welcomed and assisted by their counterparts, any such effort by women in the professional field is eyed with jealousy and contempt and perceived as a threat to male monopoly. Hence, while men do not have to struggle hard to prove their worth, women, most of the time, have to work harder to prove not just that they are efficient but that they can render more than men in a similar position.

Lately, however, the domain of femininity has expanded to include the social and professional fields. The traditional notions about gender roles are undergoing transformation that has been mainly because of education. An open and educated society is paving the way for role-swapping-which seems to be gaining grounds in the highly demanding developmental social structure. Domestic life has become almost unthinkable without flexibility in gender roles. Quite often, the demanding career of one parent forces the single parent to perform both the gender roles for the child.

The society, especially the urban society, can simply not move ahead without role-swapping. And this is evident in the day-to-day lives of common people. While men at least some-are beginning to shed their inhibitions about working in the kitchen, women are found working late hours. The changing trends are

especially reflected in women taking over the jobs of air-pilots and astronauts while men are proving their skills as chefs and make-up artists. Yet another proof of the emergence of flexibility in gender roles is that of the changing face of advertising. The products which were once advertised with women as the potential buyers, are now being targeted differently, and both men and women are considered the decision makers. For instance, advertisements for domestic products, say washing powder feature men as models, and the corporate ads include women in their commercials.

Swapping roles to accommodate the social or professional pressures has become a common phenomenon. However, it is in the urban centres that the flexibility is most evident. The rural front, though in transition, has a long way to go in this context. The present scenario is such that rural women share the work of men and receive no help in the domestic sphere.

To conclude, the flexibility in gender roles needs to be taken to the extent where finally the concept of respective gender roles is done away with. The biological roles cannot be swapped-at least at the present level of technological endeavor-but efforts are needed in social and professional fields such that roles come to exist only for departments or persons and not on the basis of gender.