



IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

Variation in gender roles across different cultures

KEY DATES

1920 Women in the US are given the right to vote.

1939–45 Women in the UK and subsequently in the US prove themselves capable of doing “men’s work” during World War II; factory worker Rosie the Riveter becomes a US icon of female capability and economic potential.

1972 British sociologist Ann Oakley argues in *Sex, Gender, and Society* that gender is a matter of culture.

1975 In her article “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” US cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin argues that heterosexual family arrangements give men power and oppress women.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SEXES ARE CULTURAL CREATIONS

MARGARET MEAD (1901–1978)

Men and women **learn their gender roles** through systems of reward and punishment...

...but definitions of “**natural**” tendencies of men and women **vary from culture to culture.**

Women **need not be nurturers** of children.

Men **need not be the dominant sex.**

Differences between the sexes are cultural creations.

In early 20th-century US society, a man’s role was to provide for his family, while women were relegated to the private sphere and considered responsible for childcare and housework because they were thought to be naturally more inclined to such roles. Margaret Mead, however, believed that

gender is not based on biological differences between the sexes, but rather reflects the cultural conditioning of different societies.

Mead’s investigations of the intimate lives of non-Western peoples in the 1930s and 1940s crystallized her criticisms of her own society: she claimed that the ways in which US society

See also: Judith Butler 56-61 ■ R.W. Connell 88-89 ■ Talcott Parsons 300-01 ■ Ann Oakley 318-19 ■ Jeffrey Weeks 324-25

expressed gender and sexuality restricted possibilities for both men and women. Mead claims that men and women are punished and rewarded to encourage gender conformity, and what is viewed as masculine is also seen as superior.

Comparing cultures

Mead takes a comparative approach to gender in her studies of three tribes in New Guinea. Her findings challenge conventional Western ideas about how human behavior is determined. Arapesh men and women were "gentle, responsive, and cooperative" and both undertook childcare—traits the West would see as "feminine."

Similarly, it was the norm for Mundugumor women to behave in a "masculine" way by being as violent and aggressive as the men. And in a further reversal of traditional Western roles, women in Tchambuli society were dominant, while men were seen as dependent.

The fact that behaviors coded as masculine in one society may be regarded as feminine in

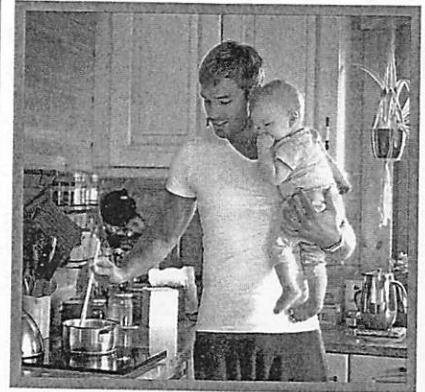
another, leads Mead to argue that temperamental attitudes can no longer be regarded as sex-linked.

Her theory that gender roles are not natural but are created by society established gender as a critical concept; it allows us to see the historical and cross-cultural ways in which masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are ideologically constructed.

Change can happen

Mead's work laid the foundations for the women's liberation movement and informed the so-called "sexual revolution" of the 1960s onward. Her ideas posed a fundamental challenge to society's rigid understandings of gender roles and sexuality.

Following on from Mead, feminists such as US cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin argued that if gender, unlike sex, is a social construction, there is no reason why women should continue to be treated unequally. Viewing gender as culturally determined allows us to see, and



Gender roles are cultural creations, according to Mead. There is no evidence that women are naturally better than men at doing the housework or caring for children.

therefore challenge, the ways in which social structures such as the law, marriage, and the media encourage stereotyped ways of conducting our intimate lives.

In comparison to the early 20th century, gender roles for both men and women in the 21st century have become far less restrictive, with women participating more in the public sphere. ■

Margaret Mead



Margaret Mead was born in Philadelphia in 1901. Her father was a professor of finance; her mother was a sociologist; she herself became curator emeritus of the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

Mead received her PhD from Columbia University in 1929, and went on to become a leading cultural anthropologist, best known for her studies of the people of Oceania. Her early work on gender and sexuality was labeled as scandalous and she was denounced as a "dirty old woman." She nevertheless

became a popular figure, lecturing widely on key social issues such as women's rights, sexual behavior, and the family. Mead was the author of more than 20 books, many of which were part of her mission to make anthropology more accessible to the public. She died in New York in 1978.

Key works

1928 *Coming of Age in Samoa*
1935 *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*
1949 *Male and Female*