2. Gender, Family, and Productive Labor: A (Very) Brief History

Kristin Kobes Du Mez

Kristin Kobes Du Mez is Professor of History at Calvin College. She is the author of A New Gospel for Women: Katharine Bushnell and the Challenge of Christian Feminism (Oxford, 2015), and her current research focuses on gender, religion, and American politics. She has written for The Washington Post and Religion & Politics, and she blogs at Patheos’ Anxious Bench.

Conversation about work, family, and gender roles often centers around identifying and facilitating ideal divisions of labor between women and men, both on the home front and in the paid labor force. Bringing a historical perspective to bear on these questions can help illuminate the challenges, constraints, and choices that have brought us to this present moment and help us to better discern problems and possibilities going forward.

Recent data reveal both continuity and change when it comes to how Americans divide responsibilities. A 2015 Pew survey, for example, reveals that in 46 percent of two-parent households, both parents work full time (up from 31 percent in 1970). Yet even in dual-income families, women continue to take on the bulk of unpaid household labor. According to a 2015 Council on Contemporary Families report, “despite substantial increases in married mothers’ employment and the expressed desire of the majority of women and men to share employment and caregiving responsibilities, gender remains the most influential determinant of who does the housework and child care today.” Although far less skewed than fifty years ago, time diary data reveals that married mothers still do almost three and a half times as much “core housework” (cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry) as do men.
American women and men often find it difficult to balance responsibilities of paid employment and household labor, a challenge made more acute due to the way gender identity and economic developments have been intertwined over the course of the nation’s history.

Attention to how American women and men have both divided and defined labor reveals both persistence and change, and it illuminates how the division of labor has never simply been about the tasks accomplished, but also about the meaning ascribed to those tasks.

**Labor Patterns Through History**

If we begin with the colonial era, we immediately encounter a diversity of gendered labor arrangements. Native American communities, for example, divided labor in a variety of different ways, and often in ways that contrasted starkly with British, French, and Spanish colonial practices. The experiences of indentured servants and African Americans (slave and free), together with diversity across social classes, further complicate any historical notion of identifying a “traditional” American division of labor.

But to trace one dominant strand in the evolution of gender and work in America, we might do well to begin with an examination of the system of household production that was common throughout colonial New England. In her remarkable book *A Midwife’s Tale*, historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich allows us to peer into the household of Martha Ballard, an eighteenth-century midwife who kept a diary containing meticulous details on the gendered division of labor around the time of the American Revolution.¹

There was women’s work—giving birth to and nursing children, planting and harvesting household gardens, preserving and preparing food, spinning flax and wool into cloth, and making clothes and keeping the household running. (As a midwife, Ballard also engaged in productive labor outside her household orbit, something that was not typical but also not unusual for colonial women.)

And there was men’s work—plowing the fields, harvesting flax, shearing sheep, and hunting on occasion. Men, too, engaged more fully in public life. Martha’s husband was a surveyor and ran a saw mill, and in this the Ballard family was typical; public business was primarily the realm of men.

Despite this gendered division of labor, however, Ulrich notes that women and men worked in close proximity to one another, cooperating on many tasks, and contributing essential components of household production. In colonial New England, the labor of each was highly valued. The work of provision was equitably shared.

But by the end of Ballard’s life, industrialization would begin to change these labor patterns. As factories appeared and entrepreneurial capitalism began to edge out agrarianism, the nature of work changed as well. Increasingly, men went away from the home to their place of employment. Women, however, remained at home. There they continued to raise children, produce and preserve food, clean, sew, and provide other essential household labor.

Historians have noted that as more and more men started working for wages, the meaning of “work” began to change. “Work” was something that happened outside of the home, and something for which one received a paycheck.

How women spent their days didn’t initially change all that much. They still engaged in productive labor, doing laundry, cooking, tending gardens, raising children. (Eventually some of this labor was lightened for middle- and upper-middle-class women thanks to domestic servants and the conveniences made available through new technology and the consumer economy.) However, the meaning and value placed upon women’s work did change.

**Recategorizing Household Labor**

As “work” became increasingly associated with wage labor, women’s household labor was recategorized as something other than real work. During the Victorian era, female domesticity was celebrated and female virtue idealized—precisely because women did not engage in the dog-eat-dog world of market capitalism. Women’s realm was the domestic sphere, the place where their virtue and self-sacrifice influenced their families, and the world, for good. Within this “cult of domesticity,” women’s housework was defined not primarily as productive labor, but rather as something that came naturally to women—the expression of their womanly graces and the fulfillment of their God-given identities.

In this way, women’s domesticity was set in direct contrast to wage-work. Women were valued for their femininity, charm, and virtue, but not for their productive labor.

Even during the height of the Victorian era, this ideology of domesticity was not universal. It described the lives of some white, middle-class women, particularly those in the industrialized northeast. Poor women and women of color continued to perform backbreaking labor. Yet this domestic ideal wielded remarkable cultural power, even among women who did not (or could not) live up to the ideal. Such women were often judged harshly; their virtue was questioned, and they were not considered “true women.” In this way, they were also not deemed worthy of the respect and protection afforded proper women.

By the early twentieth century, this “cult of domesticity” had begun to wane. With the rise of higher education for women and the shift to a consumer economy, more women began to enter the labor market. Feminists, too, understood that productive labor gave women a claim to social power and
provided women with economic independence, and they worked to open up more career opportunities for women.

Well into the twentieth century, however, the domestic ideal for women remained formative. This was especially the case among conservative religious communities, which in the Victorian era had developed a theology of female domesticity that relegated to men the gender-specific tasks of both protection and provision. Even today, when people speak of “traditional” gender arrangements and uphold an ideal of the male “breadwinner,” they are drawing on this Victorian ideal.

Women’s lived experiences, however, continued to depart in significant ways from this ideal. The ideal had always been out of reach of poorer women and most women of color, and the Depression and the Second World War made this ideal difficult even for many white, middle-class women to attain. (And difficult if not impossible for men to uphold their end of the bargain).

Even during the resurgence of female domesticity in the 1950s, many women found it necessary or desirable to work for wages. Yet they were doing so on unequal terms. Most jobs, especially high-paying positions, were off-limits to women. Want ads separated jobs by gender, and even if hired in the same position, women often got paid less than their male counterparts.

Addressing these inequities provided early momentum for the resurgence of organized feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1963, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act; in 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibited most employment discrimination on the basis of sex; and in 1965, the Supreme Court ruled in Weeks v. Southern Bell that gender-based restrictive labor laws were unconstitutional, opening up previously restricted occupations to women. Feminists also agitated for protections against sexual harassment in the workplace.

During the 1960s, many female homemakers, too, found themselves questioning their roles. The idealization of domesticity promised women that they would find fulfillment as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Many women did find joy and fulfillment in these tasks, but some women felt constrained by the mundane routines of housework, or frustrated that their efforts did not seem to be valued, culturally or economically. To make matters worse, the rise of suburbia meant that many housewives were cut off from extended families and supportive communities, and they found themselves geographically isolated, lonely, and unfulfilled.

When Betty Friedan published The Problem That Has No Name in 1963, many of these women discovered they were not alone, and that their dissatisfaction might not be due to their own shortcomings. (At the same time, it is worth noting that while some men enjoyed the “Leave-it-to-Beaver” gendered division of labor, going off to work each morning and returning each evening to happy children and a home-cooked meal, others felt burdened by the stress of fulfilling their role as sole breadwinner and the monotonous work that left them little time for home and family life.)
Conflicting Expectations in the Contemporary Economy

Contemporary work and family arrangements reflect this complicated and dynamic history of gender and labor. On the one hand, legal protections that require equal pay for equal work and prohibit workplace discrimination have opened up a wide array of employment opportunities for women. At the same time, economic changes, including a shift to a postindustrial and increasingly globalized economy, the decline of labor unions, and the costs of living in a consumer society, have often necessitated dual wage-earning families. But in the midst of these changing circumstances, historically rooted patterns of household labor persist, as women continue to take on a disproportionate share of the burden of housekeeping duties, even when both spouses work. And even today, gender identity remains intertwined with work, both inside and outside the home.

As a result, many women and men feel torn between conflicting expectations.

The idealization of female domesticity and motherhood haunts many working women, who fear they might be neglecting their spouses and children. For those working long, inflexible hours, there are simply not enough hours in a day to fulfill expectations on both fronts. Working moms often feel judged by other women, by their extended families, and by their church communities. Stay-at-home-moms, on the other hand, may feel their own unremunerated work is undervalued (a devaluation deeply rooted in history), and may feel as though they’ve failed to take advantage of the advances other women fought so hard to achieve. They may also feel judged by other women, feel socially isolated, or face frustrations that their skills and experiences count for little if and when they seek to reenter the labor force.

Some women internalize these tensions, blaming themselves for their perceived inadequacies—their inability to keep a Pinterest-worthy home, to lavish sufficient attention on each child, to volunteer, to achieve something meaningful outside the home, to bring in a decent paycheck, or to feel content with whatever their lot may be.

Men, too, can be burdened by expectations that often conflict with economic realities. Some men feel obligated to be sole breadwinners even when their income can’t support their families. Stay-at-home dads, or dads who choose to work part-time in order to take a more active role in childrearing or pursue other non-remunerative work, may face judgment or confront feelings of inadequacies in light of longstanding traditions that define housework and childcare as feminine and wage-earning as a masculine endeavor. The fact that health care and other benefits are often linked to full-time employment makes it difficult for women and men alike to achieve a desired work/life integration that allows for individual and communal flourishing.

In twenty-first century America, the economy continues to evolve. As deindustrialization and globalization continue unabated, we are witnessing the expansion of an information and service-based economy that demands an ongoing reassessment of gendered notions of provision, and the meaning of productive labor.
In many ways, then, a historical perspective can illuminate why decisions about gender roles, work, and family are so fraught. History reveals that complex economic and social developments have long constrained choices and defined expectations. By being attentive to this history, we can better consider the meaning and value we assign to labor. We can open ourselves up to reconsidering what constitutes productive labor, and how we might better distribute that labor in a way that promotes human flourishing.

In the end, history doesn’t offer clear answers when it comes to addressing issues of gender, family, and labor. But a knowledge of history and its complexities can help us ask better questions.

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