



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Breaking Out of a Gendered Box

Centering What's Most Human When Writing About Work, Family, and Care

By Vicki Shabo

The American public's views on gender are complex and often internally inconsistent, and they vary by demographics, life experience, and ideology. However, most people, regardless of their gender or views on the topic, are bound by a desire to protect and support themselves and their loved ones financially, physically, and emotionally. For the most part, people living in the U.S. understand this as a shared value.

In the full version of this issue primer, we share current statistics on how people in the United States perceive, experience, and discuss the impact of gender roles in work, family, and care contexts. We present current data on disparities in labor force participation, wages, time use—and offer ways to acknowledge shared struggles rather than reinforce zero-sum mindsets around gender. We also offer suggestions for storytellers interested in leaning into audiences' demonstrated desire for stories that depict characters of all genders managing work and care, navigating conflicts, and finding solutions.

Our hope is that more nuanced and authentic media representation will help people and communities find common ground around realities, hardships, and joys that are human. Over time, more intentional and human-centered storytelling can help break down gender-related systemic barriers, implicit biases, and cultural expectations and lay the groundwork for advances in gender equity.

Read the full brief: [newamerica.org/entertainment/genderroles](https://newamerica.org/entertainment/genderroles)

## THE PROBLEM

### Most Americans believe in gender equality as a value, but zero-sum fears divide us.

Sixty-three percent of Americans believe in gender equality as a value, but many also believe that women's success comes at men's expense.

Women and men have different life experiences and face different challenges, but zero-sum thinking about gender roles—and language that overstates differences—harms nearly everyone. Language and depictions suggesting that “men’s” and “women’s” roles are inherently distinguishable:

- Can be at odds with how most people in the United States move through their daily lives;
- Perpetuate unhelpful thinking about one group's success coming at another's expense;
- Contradict growing openness to people of all genders engaging in a range of work, family, and caregiving tasks; and
- Reinforce implicit and explicit pressures to “live up to” outdated gendered ideals and perceived societal expectations.

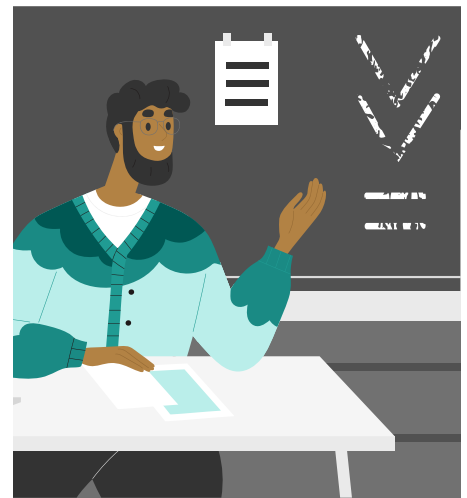
## A RESPONSE

### Focus on what connects us as humans.

When media shows all people engaging in human activities like work, caregiving, and community engagement, it can break down stereotypes. Showing people navigating conflicts and barriers can help advance cultural and practical solutions.

Storytellers can:

- Acknowledge the realities of different lived experiences, barriers, opportunities, and cultural expectations
- Surface and interrogate outdated stereotypes without dismissing or glorifying characters who may prefer traditional gender roles;
- Embrace honest dialogue about what works and what doesn't for all people who are managing work and family care;
- Highlight how the lack of systemic work, family, and care supports contributes to frustration for people of all genders;
- Avoid tropes that pit women and men against each other in ways that slot people into particular roles based on their gender;
- Embed nuanced representation of people holding jobs and caring for loved ones in ways that are not gendered; and
- Allow characters to express complex emotions and work together competently to manage the hardships, joys, humor, and sorrows in their lives.



Read our full issue primer for data about Americans' experiences with gender roles, current statistics on the wage and labor force gaps, and tips for storytellers to emphasize characters' shared humanity.

[newamerica.org/  
entertainment/genderroles](https://newamerica.org/entertainment/genderroles)