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### **Women Pursue Equal Relationships: Face Social Pressures**

(March 6, 2014) – Relationships are complicated. Women today strive for establishing equal relationships, yet it remains hard to do. New research from *Gender & Society* reveals that women increasingly seek egalitarian partnerships with men, while retaining some traditional dating rituals.

Sociologist [Ellen Lamont](#) at New York University interviewed 38 college-educated women in her study “[Negotiating Courtship: Reconciling Egalitarian Ideals with Traditional Gender Norms](#).” Her study, forthcoming in the April issue of *Gender & Society*, the top-ranked gender studies and sociology journal, interestingly finds that the women interviewed decisively pursued egalitarian relationships with men, yet also relied on conventional gender norms while dating.

The women in the study – highly educated, high-income professionals – expressed that their practice of reinforcing gender differences in their dating lives did not impact their egalitarian ideals. Despite their egalitarian beliefs, many participants still believed that when it comes to dating, men are responsible for asking women out, paying for dates, determining when the relationship will shift from casual to committed, and proposing marriage.

#### **Why do women uphold gendered dating traditions despite egalitarian ideals?**

- The women in the study communicated the belief that men are “naturally” hesitant to make a commitment in a relationship. In this case, the women did not want to put men off by explicitly proposing marriage or a committed relationship.
- Women feared rejection from men if they initiated a date, or other courtship activities.
- Some of the participants expressed their preference for being pursued and desired, rather than being the one who initiates.

#### **What has changed?**

- The women in the research openly described their ideal relationship to be one in which partners equally shared economic, housework, and child care responsibilities.

- Three quarters of the 32 women who had or wanted children had not interrupted or would choose not to interrupt their careers.
- The study cites research (Gerson 2010) that if an egalitarian relationship is not possible, women would rather choose financial independence than a traditional partnership.

### **Room for improvement**

- While the women interviewed were mostly successful in getting what they wanted in their relationships, they felt the need to disguise nontraditional behavior due to social pressures. For example, to ensure men desired commitment, some women concealed their own desires for commitment.
- Lamont suggests an apparent contradiction in that the women exhibit traditional dating norms, which reinforce beliefs about natural gender difference, while pursuing egalitarian ideals in relationships.
- According to Lamont, if women continue to retain traditional dating rituals and uphold differing relational expectations for men, this will only reinforce non-egalitarian behavior.

The research highlights progress as women continue to pave the road for cascading levels of equality in relationships, but demonstrates that women continue to feel constrained by social expectations and gender norms.

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**Source:** Lamont, Ellen. 2013. “[Negotiating Courtship: Reconciling Egalitarian Ideals with Traditional Gender Norms](#)” forthcoming in March *Gender & Society*.

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### **Additional Researchers** *Interviews available upon request*

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### **Further information**

[Gender & Society](#) is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and gender studies. Gender & Society, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than seven percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on twitter: [@Gend\\_Soc](#).

For more information, contact Gender & Society editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Her research and teaching focus primarily on inequality. She can be reached at [misra@soc.umass.edu](mailto:misra@soc.umass.edu).

[Sociologists for Women in Society](#) (SWS) currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at [jsprague@ku.edu](mailto:jsprague@ku.edu).

### **Related Studies**

[The Uneven Pace of Change in Heterosexual Romantic Relationships: Comment on England](#) by Nikki L. Graf and Christine R. Schwartz in *Gender & Society*, February 2011; vol. 25, 1: pp. 101-107, first published on December 22, 2010.

[The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled](#) by Paula England in *Gender & Society*, April 2010; vol. 24, 2: pp. 149-166.

[Moral dilemmas, moral strategies, and the transformation of gender: Lessons from two generations of work and family change](#) by Kathleen Gerson in *Gender & Society*, February 2002; vol. 16, 1: pp. 8-28.