



Interview with Dr. Stephanie Coontz

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

I'm pleased to be with you, Stephanie. Dr. Stephanie Coontz has a long list of accolades and a couple key ones are that she's the Director of Research and Public Education for the Council on Contemporary Families. She's also emeritus faculty of History and Family Studies at Evergreen State College in Olympia. And you're an advisor for MTV on its anti-bias campaign. You're the author of a lot of incredible books so we're pleased to have you here. The purpose of our conversation today is to hear your points of view on what the research is telling us, what you've seen around how men and women are dealing with dividing, what's on everybody's minds or many people's minds in this work from the home environment, around how the divvying up is going with family responsibilities, work responsibilities, especially where people have school aged children and kind of what we're hearing about that. There's some good news, I understand, and there's a whole lot of other news. So, I wanted to hear the context from you.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Well, it's really important to remember that this is an unfolding story and the averages are not really helpful to us. For example, women have lost the majority of jobs in terms of furloughs but they're also a majority of essential workers. So, you have all sorts of combinations going on. Situations where the man has been furloughed and the woman is an essential worker and he's learning the hard way about all the invisible labor that he was able to take for granted for many years.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

That is the good news, right?

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

It can be eventually good news. You have the women who are, vice versa, and are just getting overwhelmed. And a lot of their reaction depends on what men and women were doing before. One study that we have about how men and women are dividing housework and childcare is that, when the men who were already stepping up to the plate, they've stepped up to the plate a lot more. And that's one of the good news things because we know from lots of experiments and also from the experience of paid parental leave, that when men do begin to get accustomed to the kind of work that goes in the home, that they were able to ignore, especially the executive planning work and the invisible work that women so often complain about but the men don't even know has to be done, they'd begin to step up to the plate and it lasts.



For example, when Quebec and Norway did “use it or lose it” paternity leave and made it real, for years afterwards, men did more housework and childcare. Couples reported that they fighting far less than before. Girls growing up in those homes as teenagers were assigned less housework and fewer chores than in homes where the men had not taken paternity leave. So, it can make a difference.

But on the other hand, we've had 200 years, and only 200 years, a lot of people think the male breadwinner family is traditional and that women were always the nurturers and that's not true at all.

We had about 200 years of socializing into thinking that women are more expert at the home and at nurturing and that men are more expert at the work. So, there is a tendency, when new tasks come along, to think that, "Well, the woman will be able to handle this." And the woman herself often indulges in unconscious sabotage of what we call gate keeping, of saying, "Well, he's not going to be able to do it." So, the big problem here has been the homeschooling issue. And for the homeschooling, women are doing 70% of that. And the result has been that it's just overwhelming. It was one thing when it might be a month or two but as we go into this new school year with 21 of the top 25 school districts going from home, it's not something that two people can divide among themselves.

And so, the result is that something's going to give and, unfortunately, given the patterns, not only of socialization but the fact that men generally have higher pay anyway and, also something employers should pay attention to, they tend to assume that women do caregiving and there is a certain amount of prejudice that steps into their hiring and promotion on that. But they don't penalize women for taking time off for caregiving, other than just the usual promotion. Men get penalized much more than women for taking time off because the ideal male worker doesn't do that. He's got a wife to take care of that. So, between that and the higher salary, the result is that many couples fall into the fallback position of, "Well, it's the woman."

We have a fairly new study of telecommuters, where people can work from home. The women have been five times more likely to cut back their work hours and, to do so, by five times the ratio that men have cut back their work hours. I'm chatting too much. But let me add one more thing.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Yeah, no, this is great. You said so many things I want to dive into. I'm glad you're giving us the broad brush.



Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Well, we have some very interesting studies of before telecommuting and after. Before COVID-19, what telecommuting was like and afterwards. And telecommuting, as you know, is something that many parents want to do. Men, in particular, who have tripled their childcare since the 1960s and '70s, and who say they want to do more, really like the idea of telecommuting. But it's very interesting. It has different gender effects at home and at work, depending on who's doing it. When these researchers compared what males did when they were telecommuting, as opposed to when they were at work, they did more than an hour's worth of extra childcare, even though they had been doing childcare before. Women who telecommuted were already doing more childcare but they only added about 20 minutes to their childcare. And the result was a convergence and, in fact, almost equality in childcare when the man was telecommuting. But here's the problem.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

I was going to say, "There's something else coming here."

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

I think that there's a kicker. When the men were telecommuting, they did not increase their housework though. And when the women were telecommuting, they increased their housework by almost an hour and the result was increasing economic inequality. And the other big thing that happens with telecommuting, and it's not sure whether it's because the children feel more free to interrupt mom or because moms feel less free to say, "No," to kids who ask for attention, female telecommuters are interrupted about three times as much often when they're trying to work, not when they're trying to do childcare, than men are.

So, these are all really problematic, both for equality at home and for women's ability to do their job at work. And the same researchers studied how men and women are reacting to working from home versus working from a separate location in pandemic. Very interesting. Women, far happier, far less stressed, far less depressed when they're working outside the home.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Right, exactly.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Men were happier and less anxious when they were working from home. But the office, for women who feel constantly torn between the two, it works out that... Now, I happen to be a woman who can happily step over piles of dirty laundry and a mess. But unless you have socialized yourself to do that, you are less anxious and better off at work where you have to



ignore those kinds of old female tasks. And over time, the man who stays home, can't ignore them.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Exactly. So eventually he'll be able to have the same kinds of standards that a lot of women leaders talk about. You mentioned it, unconscious sabotage. How I hear it is, "Well, my standards are so high if my husband makes dinner and it's not to my standards, then I'm just going to keep doing it." You called it gate keeping and unconscious sabotage about how we get in our own way.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Yes. There are a couple ways in which we do that. I mean, one is that you can't really blame all of this... I mean, I'm prepared to blame some of it on male behavior but, even before women are in a romantic partnership, they do much more housework and cleaning than single men do. So, there's something about our socialization that makes us less tolerant of it. Now, here's the part where sexism comes in. When researchers do studies and they show a room that's pretty clean. At least, by my standard is very clean. By yours, maybe not so clean. They show it to people. They think that it's a lot less clean when told it's occupied by a woman. So, other people have higher standards for women too. How much of it is that we've been socialized to higher standards and how much of this is we know darn well that we will be judged more harshly. And people say terrible things in these interviews that they set up about the occupants of this room when they think it's a woman than when they think it's a man.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

It's fascinating. And part of it is, we're talking about not unconsciously sabotaging ourselves and part of that is letting go of how much we care about how we're being judged. Because a lot of women will. I've heard what you just said about, "Well, you know what people are thinking" and at some level, it's how much are we going to continue to care about what they're thinking?

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Yes, that's a very important thing. And then there's another aspect of gate keeping where I think that we have to be honest when we level our well-deserved criticisms at men who act like they can't really do this and need to be told and so it's more trouble to tell them how to do it than to do it ourselves. But there's another side of it.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Right. "Vet? What vet?" "Pediatrician, I don't even know what you're talking about."



Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Right. "How do you spell that?" But there is also a sense in which sometimes we women want to have our cake and eat it too. And that is, we want the guy to help but we'd like him to recognize that we're the leader and we really know how to do it. And it's funny, I've been teaching this and researching it for years and years and years but about 10 years ago, my husband -and that was after I'd already been researching for quite a while - he walked into the kitchen and saw me reloading the dishwasher. He says, "Why would I ever load a dishwasher again if you are going to reload it." I took the point and learned my lesson but we tend to do that.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Yea, we do. We do. So, it is kind of interesting that it's that dual, "I want you to do it and be an equal. And I want you to know that this is still the standard that we're going to be".

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

And it's the other side of mansplaining is "woman-splaining".

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Say more about the dynamic around... You said kids are going to mothers 70% of the time. Was that what I got?

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Well, no, about 70%. That women are interrupted about three times as often when they're working from home than the men are.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Yeah.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

And we have no way of knowing what the dynamics are. We don't yet have observers in homes in these periods of crisis where they can sit back and say, "Ah, this is what's happening." The guys are more able to say, "No, the door's closed. You can't come." Or whether the kids just feel like, "There's no boundaries between me and mom." And so, that has to be looked at from so many different ways. I mean, the families have to start working at that at home. But employers, I think, have to recognize that this is a real danger of telecommuting for women and might really set things back in the long run if that's not changed.



Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Exactly. The concern that I'm hearing from a lot of my clients is just if we don't start to really navigate through these dynamics, we're going to lose a lot of ground and lose a lot of women in the workplace who have the option not to work, ultimately. There's a real concern about how many women we have in the workplace. And what I'm also hearing from you are there are ways that when women and men contribute to the dynamics that are there for a variety of social reasons and a variety of behavioral reasons that companies – and families - need to be aware of.

And I translate that in my mindset to the clarity around setting boundaries and having to rework boundaries that have been set over time around how you are engaging with mom when she's working in what was the guest bedroom. And now, that is actually work instead of her getting to have the privilege of getting to go somewhere else and just work uninterrupted with other grownups. Which, for the few people that I've heard that have gone back to work, I was speaking to one woman this morning who was in her office. And she said, "Gisele, this counts as vacation." Just because she was able to work without being consistently interrupted, not only by kids, but spouse and, "What are we having for lunch?"

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Well, employers would do well to realize that they designed a workforce only in the 20th century. The workforce used to be around the home and farm where women, as well as men, had to do that work and not be interrupted when needed. But they designed a workforce that assumed that a man would be available all the time because there was a woman being available for everything else. Now, first of all, that's no longer possible to assume. Many men, especially younger men, do want to spend more time at home and more time with their family. Most families do need two incomes. And if they have done the research on how much more productive firms are and how much, for example, they get better in risky situations like this when there's a lot of female participation. It doesn't happen with just a one female leader or tokenism. You have to have a truly integrated workforce before women stop getting interrupted and start feeling free to make their real innovative suggestions and especially any criticisms about what we're doing wrong.

So, if you don't start thinking to yourself, "I need to design a workplace for the real human beings who work here." Many of which... And by the way, half of all people who have caregiving responsibilities for elders are males. So, the new workforce-



Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Wow. I never knew that.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

... Today has caregiving responsibilities and we have to stop favoring the ones who do not.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

I like how you were thinking about what organizations need to keep in mind and then I'm going to ask you, "What the key messages are for women and then for men?" As you're thinking about workforces that want to retain their women leaders and their male leaders that have these caregiving responsibilities, what do you think the key things are that they can do tangibly? If managers and leaders were listening to this talk that we're doing, what would be a takeaway that they could go do something about?

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Well, it really depends on the kind of occupation in which you work. You just have to get serious about having these discussions and involving women at all levels of your organization, not just your senior ones who've often been able to sidestep it by outsourcing their labor to lower paid other women. You have to talk to everybody in your organization about it. But you can stop rewarding overwork. One of the major problems in inequality between men and women is the way, since the 1990s, that the companies have overpaid people who do overwork. In other words, they give them a bonus way beyond what their hourly wages would have said they should give. So, the result is, it makes it extremely costly for a man to cut back and extremely, just a tremendous barrier, for a woman to really go forward. So, they have to think about that.

And I think that they also have to think, as citizens. I mean, I know everybody wants to lower their taxes but we all want taxes for important infrastructures. I mean, people who use roads to deliver their products or those drones to deliver them, definitely want the government to fund those roads and that ability to do that. Well, it turns out, I think this needs to teach us that childcare and public education are critical infrastructures, not just for working families who need them, but for an economy that wants to be productive and get productive work out of its workers.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Definitely. I've heard, actually, of some companies that are not only putting resources into funding but also looking at creating onsite childcare and all sorts of other things that the government is not doing. There's a gap right now and they're having to step in. So, I definitely



get the gestalt issue of it. What about your recommendation or your key messages to women leaders?

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Well, everybody knows the Lean In kind of recommendations. I would make the kind of reach out recommendations that we need to be much more inclusive about understanding that there's a range of employees that we have in all of these firms. And some of our lower paid ones could be brought up with the proper kind of training and mentoring. You don't have to go to these outside talent scouters.

If we start looking, as a company, as an investment and workers as part of that investment, I think women could take the lead in that. And then that would yield not only more productive and more committed workers but also... Maybe this won't be popular. Maybe I'm going too far beyond my brief here but the amount of inequality that we're seeing in this society is destructive not just to... Well, it's destructive to everybody, not only in the sense that we are reaching the point where the people who feel disrespected and left out, on both sides of the ideological spectrum, are getting violent, but it's also destructive to our own lives. And there can... Let me give you a good example. We've done studies of air rage and when it's most likely to occur. It's most likely to occur in planes where the economy class has to walk through the first class.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

I have heard of that study.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

And it's not just the people who had to walk through the first class who do it. Their air rage tends to be around emotional outbursts. but the people who have been walked past and who have been reinforced with the idea that they're entitled are much more obnoxious in the kind of bullying that they do as thinking of themselves as entitled. "We're special." So, to me, that's a metaphor for what's wrong with planet spaceship that we're on right now and that we might want to think about that as well.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

I have heard from a number of clients that have school aged children. I'm thinking first-class economy in terms of when parents of school aged children are being given special dispensation to leave earlier or get some leaves and their colleagues, who don't have school aged children, they're seeing the difference, if you will, in status.

I think the other thing I'm taking away in terms of what women can do, I like your term of the unconscious sabotage and the gate keeping and starting to really become more self-aware of



where I personally, where women personally, are creating some of these different levels of standards that they're contributing to, possibly unconsciously. And the fact that they're not necessarily setting the boundaries or they've kind of erred into these dynamics that when they got to leave and go to work, it wasn't as big a deal. And now that it's all exacerbated, it's becoming very clear about the boundaries that were never there or that could become stronger.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Yeah. I think that it's so important though to strike that balance. Women didn't suck sexism out of their thumb.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

No. No, no, they didn't.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

It's built into the way companies operate. The unconscious ways that men sabotage women, just as women sabotage themselves. And it's built in also to this really extreme sense that there are classes of people, whether it's social classes, races, or genders, that have to be treated distinctly. So, it's got to be dealt with at both the subjective level of how we reinforce it ourselves and what can we do to disincentivize these behaviors and to reward more interdependent cooperative mentoring, bring everybody up behaviors.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Absolutely. And both men and women can do that. And so, as we close here, what's the key takeaway or messaging for men to be thinking about? About what they can do to contribute and help ameliorate the situation?

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Well, I think that men should step forward and not be afraid to be allies. I'm not a big believer in guilt baiting people, whether it's race or sex or whatever. But I do think that people need to just look clearly and unemotionally and unlike, "What have I done and is this my fault?" But here is the kind of inequalities that have been perpetuated. Here are what women have to think about.

I heard a very good question once at a conference I was at. The people who were conducting the workshop, they said, "Everybody in this room who has ever looked in the backseat of the car at night before you got in, raise your hand." Well, of course, almost every woman raised their hand. And men were like, "What is this?" And then, "Every person in this room who's ever been afraid you were asked to die for your country, raise your hand." And of course, all



the men and only a few women raised their hand. So, to the extent that you can point out that the flip side of this discrimination against one sex that holds them back also usually poses extra burdens on the other. Then it seems to me that you'll be able to act in a way that acknowledges inequalities but doesn't have to grovel about them.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

Oh, that's a great way of saying that, to acknowledge without groveling. So, thank you so much for your time. Any last comments you want to make in terms of what your parting words of advice are for all of us?

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

Well, right now, we're in a very difficult situation. But sometimes I think that these really difficult situations... I had to give a commencement speech about this. And I told the graduates that they were graduating into a crack in time. And these cracks in time are extremely destructive but they do offer us an opportunity. They let in the light and they offer us an opportunity to go in and rearrange things. Institutions that were too big to fail suddenly become too big to operate well. Institutions that were too small to take account of seemed to be the only ones who can handle these supply chains. And we know from history that there can be terrible tragedies that come out of these cracks in time but there can also be real lasting change. We made one after World War II and the Great Depression and it's time for us to make another.

Gisele Garcia Shelley:

I love that. I saw your commencement speech. I recommend it to everybody. It was the commencement speech at Evergreen this past May. Thank you so much, Dr. Stephanie Coontz, it was wonderful being with you and we'll stay in touch.

Dr. Stephanie Coontz:

And it was a pleasure talking with you. Thanks.