

# Study highlights importance of female roles in matrilineal families

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What do termites, elephants, whales, hyenas, and some human societies

have in common? The core of their societies is female. According to a new study led by researchers at The University of New Mexico researchers, females—not males—may provide the backbone on which complex society is built.

Published in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, Series B*, the study reviews evidence from human and animal studies to question assumptions underlying claims that men are always central to the functioning of human families.

"Anthropologists have argued for a long time that men are central to building successful human families," said Siobhán Mattison, assistant professor of evolutionary anthropology and director of the Human Family and Evolutionary Demography Lab at UNM and the study's lead author. This male-centered view emphasizes male provisioning of their wives and children, monogamy, and nuclear families.

"But human families are much more complex than that," Mattison said, "and, while it is undoubtedly the case that men provide important contributions to their families under many circumstances, they are also frequently the least reliable providers."

The study focuses on a large minority of human societies—17 percent—that are called "matrilineal." In humans, this means that women inherit [family](#) property, children belong to their mothers' lineages, or newly-married couples live in close proximity to the wife's kin.

Even in these matrilineal societies, anthropologists have claimed that men are more important than women. Moreover, instead of provisioning their own children, men in these societies supposedly give what they have to their sisters' sons.

But Mattison and her colleagues scoured the literature to find hard evidence of these avuncular transfers and came up empty-handed.

"As [evolutionary biologists](#) and anthropologists, we looked not only at human cases, but also at animals and in no case could we find credible evidence of males choosing their nieces and nephews over their own children," Mattison said.

This led Mattison and her colleagues to speculate that men in many matrilineal societies take on more peripheral roles than anthropologists have often argued, and that men might even enjoy a relative lack of responsibility.

Rob Quinlan, co-author and professor of Anthropology at Washington State University said, "I think the important message is that patriarchy is not a human universal. Power can be concentrated in women as the core of at least some communities and family systems. So, even in cultures where men are supposed to be providers and leaders, on the ground, under the right circumstances, wealth and influence can be about personal qualities rather than gender norms. Our study emphasizes that these female-centered ecologies may not be as rare as people thought."

"We were really surprised to see how differently people studying humans and people studying animals view female-centered societies," said Darragh Hare, a co-author on the study who is a postdoctoral fellow in evolutionary anthropology at UNM.

"Some of the most exciting aspects of social organization, for example achieving large-scale cooperation, accumulating vast stores of ecological knowledge, and multiple generations helping to rear offspring, occur in species with female-centered societies," Hare said.

Mattison hopes that this study will encourage others to consider the

female perspective more carefully.

"This has implications for the quality of our science—where we want to understand the full range of how people contribute to families across societies. We may have previously overemphasized the significance of men in the full range of [human societies](#). Future work will clarify that. In the meantime, our review suggests that matriliney with a strong female core is perfectly sustainable given the reliability of female kinship networks."

"Glass ceilings can invoke scientific findings to justify constraining women to roles related to mothering, but women do just about everything in some societies—planting, harvesting, childcare, politicizing—you name it. If nothing else, our study shows the vast flexibility in a human family and economic system, undermining any claims about universal differences in men's and women's capabilities and roles."

The study is published alongside others addressing the significance of female-biased kinship in humans and animals in a special theme issue edited by Mattison and colleagues published today in *Phil Trans*.

**More information:** Siobhán M. Mattison et al. The expendable male hypothesis, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2018.0080](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2018.0080) Siobhán M. Mattison et al. The expendable male hypothesis, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2018.0080](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2018.0080)

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