

# Challenging prehistoric gender roles: Research finds that women were hunters, too

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It's a familiar story to many of us: In prehistoric times, men were hunters and women were gatherers. Women were not physically capable of hunting because their anatomy was different from men. And because men were hunters, they drove human evolution.

But that story's not true, according to research by University of Delaware anthropology professor Sarah Lacy, which was recently published in [Scientific American](#) and in two papers in the journal [American Anthropologist](#).

Lacy and her colleague Cara Ocobock from the University of Notre Dame examined the division of labor according to sex during the Paleolithic era, approximately 2.5 million to 12,000 years ago. Through a review of current archaeological evidence and literature, they found little evidence to support the idea that roles were assigned specifically to each sex. The team also looked at female physiology and found that [women](#) were not only physically capable of being hunters, but that there is little evidence to support that they were not hunting.

Lacy is a biological anthropologist who studies the health of early humans, and Ocobock is a physiologist who makes analogies between modern day and the fossil record. Friends in [graduate school](#), they collaborated after "complaining about a number of papers that had come out that used this default null hypothesis that cavemen had strong gendered division of labor, the males hunt, females gather things. We were like, "Why is that the default? We have so much evidence that that's not the case," Lacy said.

The researchers found examples of equality for both sexes in ancient tools, diet, art, burials and anatomy.

"People found things in the past and they just automatically gendered them male and didn't acknowledge the fact that everyone we found in

the past has these markers, whether in their bones or in stone tools that are being placed in their burials. We can't really tell who made what, right? We can't say, 'Oh, only males flintknap,' because there's no signature left on the stone tool that tells us who made it," Lacy said, referring to the method by which [stone tools](#) were made. "But from what evidence we do have, there appears to be almost no [sex differences](#) in roles."

The team also examined the question of whether anatomical and physiological differences between men and women prevented women from hunting. They found that men have an advantage over women in activities requiring speed and power, such as sprinting and throwing, but that women have an advantage over men in activities requiring endurance, such as running. Both sets of activities were essential to hunting in ancient times.

The team highlighted the role of the hormone estrogen, which is more prominent in women than men, as a key component in conferring that advantage. Estrogen can increase fat metabolism, which gives muscles a longer-lasting energy source and can regulate muscle breakdown, preventing muscles from wearing down. Scientists have traced estrogen receptors, proteins that direct the hormone to the right place in the body, back to [600 million years ago](#).

"When we take a deeper look at the anatomy and the modern physiology and then actually look at the skeletal remains of ancient people, there's no difference in trauma patterns between males and females, because they're doing the same activities," Lacy said.

During the Paleolithic era, most people lived in small groups. To Lacy, the idea that only part of the group would hunt didn't make sense.

"You live in such a small society. You have to be really, really flexible,"



she said. "Everyone has to be able to pick up any role at any time. It just seems like the obvious thing, but people weren't taking it that way."

## **Man the hunter**

The theory of men as hunters and women as gatherers first gained notoriety in 1968, when anthropologists Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore published "Man the Hunter," a collection of scholarly papers presented at a symposium in 1966. The authors made the case that hunting advanced [human evolution](#) by adding meat to prehistoric diets, contributing to the growth of bigger brains, compared to our primate cousins. The authors assumed all hunters were male.

Lacy points to that gender bias by previous scholars as a reason why the concept became widely accepted in academia, eventually spreading to popular culture. Television cartoons, feature films, museum exhibits and textbooks reinforced the idea. When female scholars published research to the contrary, their work was largely ignored or devalued.

"There were women who were publishing about this in the '70s, '80s and '90s, but their work kept getting relegated to, "Oh, that's a feminist critique or a feminist approach," Lacy said. "This was before any of the work on genetics and a lot of the work on physiology and the role of estrogen had come out. We wanted to both lift back up the arguments that they had already made and add to it all the new stuff."

Lacy said the "man the hunter" theory continues to influence the discipline. While she acknowledges that much more research needs to be done about the lives of prehistoric people—especially women—she hopes her view that labor was divided among both sexes will become the default approach for research in the future.

For 3 million years, males and females both participated in subsistence

gathering for their communities, and dependence on meat and hunting was driven by both sexes, Lacy said.

"It's not something that only men did and that therefore male behavior drove evolution," she said. "What we take as de facto gender roles today are not inherent, do not characterize our ancestors. We were a very egalitarian species for millions of years in many ways."

**More information:** Sarah Lacy et al, Woman the hunter: The archaeological evidence, *American Anthropologist* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/aman.13914](https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13914)

Cara Ocobock et al, Woman the hunter: The physiological evidence, *American Anthropologist* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/aman.13915](https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13915)

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