



4 Generations of American Women

By Emily Baxter and Judith Warner

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Silent Generation: Born between 1928 and 1945¹

- **Big names:** Gloria Steinem, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Maya Angelou
- The mothers of second-wave feminism, they were born into a world in which many women—married or unmarried—could not access contraception or serve on juries and often needed a husband’s permission to obtain a credit card.²
- In 1970, when Silent Generation women were in their prime working years, ages 25 to 42:
 - Women made up 38 percent of the total workforce.³
 - 53 percent of married mothers of color with children under 18 were in the labor force, compared with only 38 percent of married white mothers with children under 18.⁴
 - Silent Generation mothers spent fewer hours in paid work than today’s moms—eight hours per week, on average, in 1965 versus 21 hours in 2011. They also dedicated four fewer hours per week to taking care of their kids but spent 14 more hours per week on housework.
 - Only 11 percent of women in the labor force had a college degree.⁵

Baby Boomers: Born between 1946 and 1964

- **Big names:** Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA)
- Older women of this group came of age during the height of the women’s liberation movement and Vietnam-era protests; they were pioneers, achieving unprecedented professional success.
- Women born in the late 1950s and early 1960s were the first group to overtake men in the completion of college degrees.⁶
- In 1990, when Baby Boomer women were between ages 26 and 44:
 - Women made up 45 percent of the labor force.⁷
 - Just more than one-quarter of working women had college degrees.⁸
 - Women were 17 percent of physicians⁹ and 22 percent of lawyers—up from less than 3 percent of lawyers in 1970.¹⁰
- The Baby Boomers were the first generation to care for their aging parents and children simultaneously;¹¹ in 2013, 15 percent of people in their 40s and 50s were providing financial support to both an aging parent and a child.¹²

Generation Xers: Born between 1965 and 1980

- **Big names:** Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Sheryl Sandberg, and Shonda Rhimes
- Generation Xers were raised to believe that girls could do anything and inherited a world shaped by profound post-1960s backlash. Older members of this cohort—like younger Baby Boomers—are more politically conservative than others in their generation.¹³
- Nearly half—46 percent—grew up in households where both parents worked.¹⁴ The divorce rate in the United States peaked during their formative years.¹⁵
- By the time the first Generation Xers finished college, women were earning more bachelor’s degrees than men. Women also began to earn more master’s degrees than men in the 1980s, a trend that continues today.¹⁶
- Generation Xers are in their “peak family years,” and in a 2013 study, they reported higher levels of work-family interference than did any other age group.¹⁷

Millennials: Born between 1981 and ?

- **Big names:** Lena Dunham, Beyoncé, and Emma Watson
- The most racially and ethnically diverse generation in American history, Millennials were raised in a world of rapidly advancing technology, income inequality, and economic uncertainty.¹⁸
- Trends toward intensive parenting and changes in technology mean that young people entering adulthood have much closer relationships with their parents than older generations: In 2013, 67 percent of mothers and 51 percent of fathers were in contact with their grown child—ages 18 to 29—daily.¹⁹
- The oldest Millennials are 34 years old and many are parents, though they are marrying and having children later than older generations. The mean age for first-time mothers was 26 in 2013,²⁰ compared with 21.4 in 1970.²¹ In 2013, the median age at first marriage was 26.6 for women and 29 for men, up from 20.8 for women and 23.2 for men in 1970.²²
- Millennial women appear to be more aggressive about asking for raises and promotions than women of other generations. A 2013 Pew Research Center study reported that roughly equal shares of Millennials at 42 percent; Generation Xers at 47 percent; and Baby Boomers at 45 percent have asked for a better job or higher salary, compared with only 33 percent of women in the Silent Generation.²³

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Endnotes

- 1 Note: The years that distinguish generational groupings are constructs; demographers, marketers, and political scientists may delineate them differently. This brief—consistent with most published sources—follows the definitions that are used by the Pew Research Center. Among generational chroniclers, there is some disagreement as to whether the Millennial generation has an endpoint and if it does, when that is; the point of delineation between the Baby Boom generation and Generation X—1961 or 1965—is also disputed.
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- 4 Bureau of the Census, *A Statistical Portrait of Women in the United States* (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1976).
- 5 Kim Parker and Wendy Wang, “Modern Parenthood: Roles of Moms and Dads Converge as They Balance Work and Family” (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2013), available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/03/14/modern-parenthood-roles-of-moms-and-dads-converge-as-they-balance-work-and-family/>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Educational attainment of women in the in the labor force, 1970-2010,” December 28, 2011, available at http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2011/ted_201111229_data.htm.
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- 10 Paula J. Dubeck and Kathryn Borman, eds., *Women and Work: A Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
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- 13 Seth Motel, “JFK torchbearers now vote more Republican,” Fact Tank, November 21, 2013, available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/11/21/jfk-torch-bearers-now-vote-more-republican/>.
- 14 Amy Goyer, “The MetLife Study of Gen X: The MTV Generation Moves into Mid-Life” (New York: MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2013), available at <https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/mmi/publications/studies/2013/mmi-gen-x.pdf>.
- 15 Claire Cain Miller, “The Divorce Surge is Over, but the Myth Lives On,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2014, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/upshot/the-divorce-surge-is-over-but-the-myth-lives-on.html?_r=0&abt=0002&abg=1.
- 16 Russell Sage Foundation, “The Rise of Women.”
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