

Why are women hunters important?

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Abstract

Have you heard that women should make dinner for their family? Or that only men should work outside the home? Unfortunately, many people believe in these ideas about gender roles. It makes it hard to look at new situations without bias.

For a long time, scientists have thought that in foraging societies, men are hunters and women are gatherers. We

questioned these ideas. We investigated how often women take part in hunting, what they hunt, and how they hunt. We found that women do hunt intentionally in a lot of foraging societies. They sometimes hunt with different tools than men. We also found women are more flexible in whom they hunt with. They often take dogs and children with them. We can use this information to rethink our historical biases about the role of women in hunting.

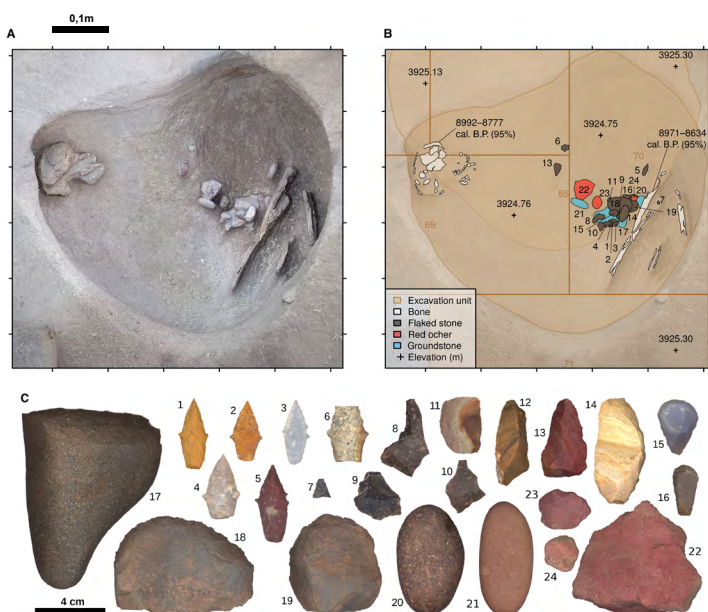
Introduction

Have you ever heard the phrase “men are hunters and women are gatherers”? A lot of people believe this **division of labor** is true. It suggests that men and women have clear roles in society. There are lots of ideas based on **sex** or **gender** that might not be true. For example, the idea that women are more nurturing, so they should take care of children. Or that men are more aggressive, so they should be protectors. Having ideas like these can affect how people look at new situations. This is called **bias**.

Unfortunately, even scientists have biases. In the past, **archaeologists** ignored hunting tools or weapons in the graves of women. Because of their biases, archaeologists didn't think women could be hunters or warriors. But hunting is very important in many **foraging societies**. These are groups of people who only hunt or gather to feed themselves. These are called **subsistence** activities.

More graves from foraging societies have been examined recently. It may have been common for women to be buried with hunting tools and weapons. **Some scientists are starting to rethink the division of labor in these societies.** Unfortunately, others say that women may have only hunted in the distant past.

We wanted to know if women in recent times (the last 100 years) hunt. We also wanted to know more about their roles in foraging societies. This information can help scientists rethink sex or gender roles with less bias.



Example of the burial of a woman hunter 9000 years ago. You can see artifacts from the burial including weapon points. This kind of discovery made us curious about women in foraging societies today. **Photo: Randall Haas**, University of California, Davis.

Methods

We chose 391 foraging societies around the world (Fig. 1) to look at. We used the Database of Places, Languages, Culture and Environment (D-PLACE) to do our research. We found 63 societies that had data about the gender of people who went hunting. We looked at these to see how many had women who go hunting. We only included data if there was a specific reference to women hunting. For example,

women going on hunting trips to track or locate animals. Or if women helped with killing animals.

Then we figured out if women hunting was intentional or if it was **opportunistic**. We recorded the size of the animals that these people hunted and if they used any special tools to hunt with. We also noted instances where women hunted with other people, dogs, or children.

Why do you think there was no data about foraging societies in Europe?

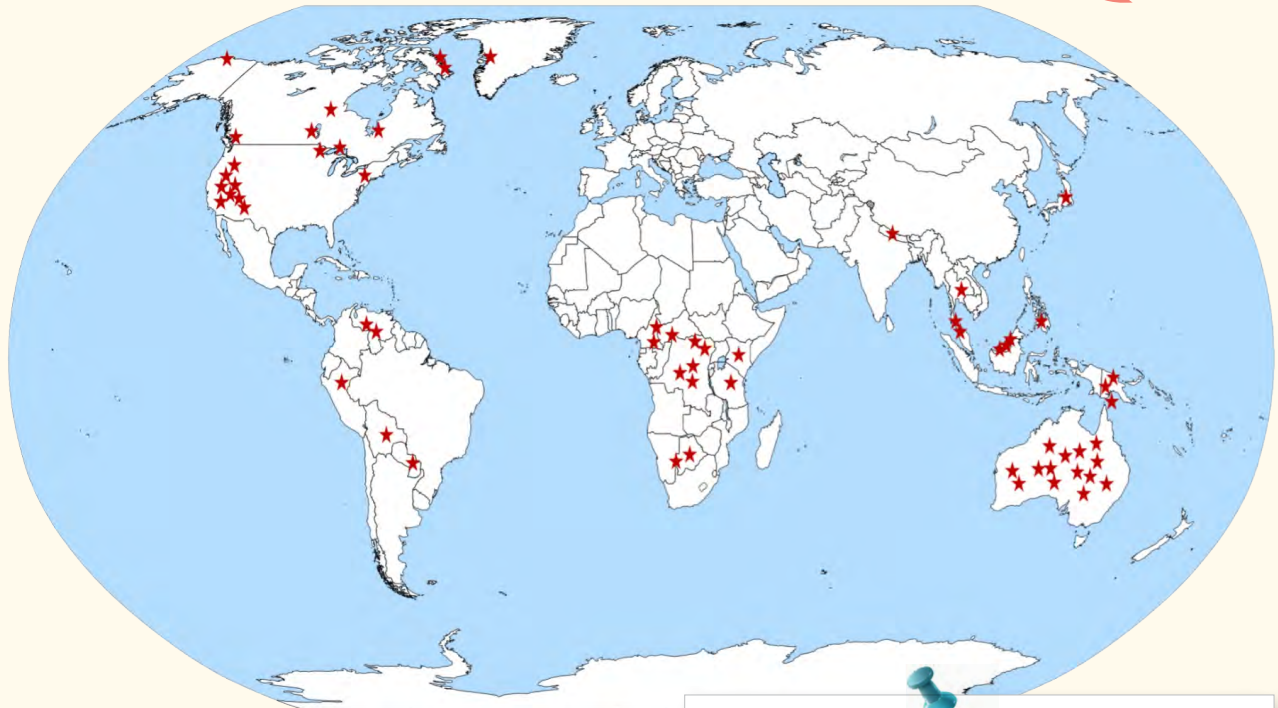


Figure 1:

Map of the locations of the 63 different foraging societies we looked at. **Image: Petr Dlouhy.**

Results

We found that 50 of the foraging societies (79%) had information about women hunting. Women hunted intentionally in 36 of these societies. We saw that women participated in hunting 100% of the time if hunting was the most important subsistence activity for the society.

Among the women who intentionally hunted, we found:

- They hunted all sizes of animals and hunted large animals 30% of the time.
- 13% of them hunted with dogs.
- 50% of them hunted with children.

Discussion

Our results show that women in foraging societies regularly take part in hunting. They contribute intentionally to make sure everyone gets fed.

In many of the societies we looked at, **women use different tools to hunt than men.** For example, Aka men in Central Africa use only nets to hunt. Aka women use nets, spears, machetes, and crossbows. Sometimes women even specialize in hunting specific animals. American Cree women only hunt **pelt animals.**

Women are also more flexible in their hunting strategies than men. They hunt with husbands, other women, children,

dogs, or alone. Men tend to hunt alone or with one partner. Our data also shows that having to care for children doesn't get in women's way. They just take the kids out hunting with them!

Our data oppose the common belief that women only gather food while men only hunt. **In foraging societies today, women do hunt – and men gather, too!** Scientists need to re-evaluate evidence from old burials based on our findings. We also need to develop a more inclusive framework to understand human culture. This should be a framework that isn't limited by the division of labor based on sex or gender.

Conclusion

The results of our study correct a bias that many people have about the abilities and activities of women. Women in foraging societies are intentionally involved in hunting. It is hard to keep personal biases separate from understanding new situations or data. It is hard even for scientists.

When you encounter new situations, do your best to approach them with an open mind. You can also educate yourself and others about biases. This will help us all exist in a more inclusive world.

Glossary of Key Terms

Archaeologist - someone who studies human history by digging up artifacts and other physical remains from the past.

Bias - being in favor of one thing over another in a close-minded or unfair way. This can mean preferring a particular idea, person, or group over another without having real evidence.

Division of labor - the division of tasks between different individuals or groups of people. This allows people to specialize in specific tasks.

Foraging society - a community that lives in family groups and moves from place to place to find food. They hunt and gather their food and generally take only what they need.

Gender - based on society's expectations, how you're supposed to look or act depending on your sex. But a person can self-identify as any gender, somewhere along the gender spectrum, or no gender.

Opportunistic - taking advantage of the circumstances when they arise without planning in advance. For example, an animal wanders across the path and someone kills it for food.

Pelt animal - animals that are hunted for their fur. Examples include beaver, mink, and fox.

Sex - the physical differences between people who are male, female, or intersex (having physical characteristics that are both). A person typically has their sex assigned at birth based on their genitalia, but we also define biological sex by chromosomes: XX (female) or XY (male).

Subsistence - supporting yourself or your group to stay alive. For example, you forage and hunt for what you need to feed yourself and others in your group, but you don't take any extra to store.

Acknowledgment: This article's adaptation was supported by the Goggio Family Foundation.

Goggio Family Foundation

Check your understanding

- 1 What is a foraging society and why is hunting very important to these groups of people?

- 2 What are two differences the researchers found between how men and women hunt?

- 3 A common gender role idea is that women should be responsible for childcare. Historically, this was a way people explained why women couldn't be hunters. Why did people think that before? What evidence did we discover against this idea?

- 4 What are some other gender roles in society that you know of? Come up with two ideas of how we might be able to combat these biases in society.

- 5 Archaeologists study artifacts from the past, especially graves. Pick a few things from your life that you might be buried with. What would these items tell an archaeologist about your life?

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