

How 'cat lady' became an insult for women of a certain age

By [Scottie Andrew](#), CNN

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A stereotypical "cat lady" is eccentric, lonely and keeps company only with her pet felines. So why did Sen. JD Vance use the phrase to describe Vice President Kamala Harris?

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women without children who share their homes with cats, but here, he used it to describe Harris and other politicians who don't have biological children.

"We're effectively run in this country, via the Democrats, via our corporate oligarchs, by a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives and the choices that they've made," Vance said. "And so they wanna make the rest of the country miserable, too."

"You look at Kamala Harris, Pete Buttigieg, AOC — the entire future of the Democrats is controlled by people without children," he went on. "And how does it make any sense that we've turned our country over to people who don't really have a direct stake in it?" (Buttigieg and his husband announced that they adopted twins the month following Vance's interview.)

Vance's using "cat lady" as a dig at Harris "expresses hostility for women in public office by implying they should be at home" with children, said Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, a professor at the University of Wollongong in Australia who authored a chapter about "crazy cat ladies" in the nonfiction book "Animaladies."

But Harris, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, doesn't fit the part of the stereotypical "cat lady." She's married, for one, and has two stepchildren. She's a politician and therefore a public figure, not a shut-in. And as far as we know, she doesn't own any cats.

"It's a sexist framing for child-free women, but more importantly, it doesn't seem to matter if she has children or not," Probyn-Rapsey told CNN. "It's a tool in the misogynist's tool box — an attempt to exclude women from the public sphere and imply that her contributions to political life come at the cost of family, or, as Vance is implying, the whole nation."

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Resurfaced JD Vance video draws the ire of Jennifer Aniston and Taylor Swift fans

03:12 - Source: [CNN](#)

How the 'cat lady' was created

The stereotypical "cat lady" we know today is typically depicted as haggard, mentally unstable and willfully isolated save for her abundance of cats. And though Vance's description of "cat lady" didn't include "crazy," madness has been associated with "cat ladies" for over a century.

In ancient Egypt, cats were symbolic of femininity, personified in the goddess Bastet, who was frequently portrayed as a cat or a woman with a feline head. The "felinization of women" in ancient society "reflected women's power," wrote Corey Wrenn, a sociologist from the University of Kent in a 2018 [analysis](#) of gendered feline imagery. But sometimes, Wrenn said, that power was perceived as "threatening and necessary to suppress."



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who didn't adhere to the norms of childbearing and domesticity. Cats became associated with disobedient women like Agnes Waterhouse, thought to be the first woman executed for witchcraft in England upon her death in 1566. She apparently confessed that her pet cat, reportedly called Satan, had killed local livestock at her behest and had previously killed humans under the cat's previous owner, also a purported witch.

"There is something about the independence of cats, something I like about them, which can be linked with a suspicion of independent women," said Alice Madicott, whose book "Cat Women" prods the "crazy cat lady" stereotype. "A woman that chooses an animal that is arguably never entirely tamed is to be suspected of being untameable herself."

The spinster stereotype was born in the 18th century, wrote Linda Rodriguez McRobbie in a 2017 piece for the Boston Globe. Women who couldn't marry became "dependents in their relatives' households," Rodriguez McRobbie wrote, draining their finances and besmirching their social standings.

The great spinsters of literature were often portrayed as, if not monstrous, then ugly, cruel and unwanted. Miss Havisham of Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations" goes mad with heartbreak and vengeance, never removing the wedding dress she wore when she was spurned at the altar. (Plus, Rodriguez McRobbie wrote, Havisham was said to be based on a real-life spinster who nursed her two cats and bulldog like children.)

Even beloved novelist Jane Austen, who was herself unmarried, wrote unflatteringly of spinsters: Miss Bates in "Emma" is, Austen writes, "neither young, handsome, rich, nor married" and often annoys her young heroine.

Cats once again became associated with spinsters gone mad. In the 1881 edition of the magazine Potter's American Monthly, writer Hart Ayrault described unmarried women as "having failed in the prime object of existence" — marriage, in his view. He dispenses several stereotypes that we've come to associate with the "crazy cat lady," including isolation, social rejection and a lack of maternal instinct for all creatures but her pets.

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Anti-suffrage postcard, with an image of an angry white cat holding a card with the text "Vote For Shes," captioned "The 'Suffragette, ' Down with the Tom Cats, " by artist William Henry Ellam, 1905. Ken Florey Suffrage Collection/Gado/Getty Images

Out of the spinster and the dangerously independent suffragettes grew the stereotypical cat lady we think of today. Real-life cat owners living in squalor like Big Edie in “Grey Gardens” and those seen in distressing episodes of the reality series “Hoarders” only shaded in the image that the term “cat lady” brings to mind.

But reducing people to the pets they own diminishes everything else about them, said Susan Michals, founder of the popular cat-centric convention [CatCon](#).

“Anyone who is using ‘cat lady’ in a negative way is assuming a woman who loves her cat does not also have a rich, full life that includes friendships, career, and meaningful interests,” Michals told CNN.

Many women proudly reclaim ‘cat lady’

So-called cat ladies have been reclaiming the term for more than a century. Women’s suffragists took back the image of the cat in pro-suffrage advertisements, portraying themselves as hardscrabble fighters devoted to their cause. On a cross-country tour of the US, suffragists Nell Richardson and Alice Burke even adopted a black cat that became the “unofficial mascot” of their movement.

Today’s cat ladies are owning the term regardless of marital status. It’s emblazoned on T-shirts and books, and self-proclaimed cat ladies are using it to name their blogs and their cat-oriented businesses. And since Vance’s comments resurfaced this week, “childless cat lady” is now appearing on new merchandise including bumper stickers and yard signs.

Michals proudly wears the term “cat lady” because she’s unashamed of her love for cats — though she prefers “cat *woman*,” which brings to mind the various sexy iterations of the

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Taylor Swift is seen in New York in 2014 with one of her cats. Raymond Hall/GC Images/Getty Images

“It seems cat-like aspects as a young woman are to be applauded, but owning a cat, especially once you approach middle-age and even worse if you are single, is a sign that something is wrong with you,” Madicott said.

The “crazy cat lady” taboo remains. Vance used it to insult Harris and other politicians who don’t have biological children. Even Swift expressed fear about becoming a cat lady in a 2015 [interview](#) with the Telegraph.

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“'Childless' — that's often a choice,” Michals told CNN. “And 'crazy' can mean passionate and enthusiastic. It all comes down to context, and who's delivering the message.”

The legion of cat and cat *lady* supporters is strong: Cats are second only to dogs as America's most popular pet — over 37 million US households own a cat, according to 2022 statistics from the American Veterinary Medical Association. And one can never underestimate the power of loyal Swifties who align to defend their idol and her furry loves.

“Lots of people like cats and won't stomach their affection being made a target for misogyny, so Vance will have to reckon with that!” Probyn-Rapsey said.

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