

Third-Wave Feminism and Individualism: Promoting Equality or Reinforcing the Status Quo?

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No "wave" of feminism has yet relieved American women of the overwhelming responsibility for hearth and home. Even from the time of the first wave of feminism, political activists and theorists recognized the truth in exactly this point. In 1910 the suffragist Jane Addams wrote: "For many generations it has been believed that woman's place is within the walls of her own home, and it is indeed impossible to imagine the time when her duty there shall be ended or to forecast any social change which shall release her from that paramount obligation."¹

Women's oppression in the private sphere of the home has been referred to as the "final frontier" of feminism.² We can reasonably ask, what is the potential of feminism in the third wave to establish equity for women in the family? Does the concept of "choice," referring to career or stay-at-home mothers, really exist or is it an illusion that promotes little in the way of real progress toward women's equality? Have women in America been socialized to a path of "rugged individualism" in a way that compromises their quest for full citizenship?

In the first wave of feminism, attempts by suffragists to alter the political status of women required theoretical redefinition of their nature.³ Mary Wollstonecraft argued in *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* that women should be treated like "rational" creatures, not as if they were "subordinate beings" or in a state of "perpetual childhood."⁴ Suffragists were successful in establishing basic legal rights for women; their success can be measured in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the constitution. Yet at the same time, Addams was right that little progress was made with regard to women's daily

lives in the “private” sphere of the family. The political elites of the day, entirely male, were willing to grant women a basic right of citizenship as long as it did not fundamentally alter their (men’s) lives or disturb the role of women as caretakers of the home.

Over the years, feminism has sought a redefinition of gender as a category that has relegated men to the public sphere of work and women to the private sphere of home. Second-wave feminism redistributed power in the workplace by opening doors to women in education, business, and government. By any measure the fight was worth it. With second-wave feminism, women’s full citizenship came a step closer to reality. With every female doctor, lawyer, CEO, college professor, or Senator, the public perception of women’s roles was changed. Public power, to some extent, had changed and women were on the positive side of that change. But without a comparable redistribution of power in the family, what has been won? This article examines the potential for a third-wave feminist challenge to women’s subordination in the American family.

FEMINISM IN WAVES

The metaphor of “waves” is often used to describe and explain the history of feminism in the United States. The first wave of feminism in the United States is usually marked by the women’s rights convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. This included the writing of *The Declaration of Sentiments* by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as others, whose goal was establishing legal identity for women separate from their fathers and husbands. This wave crested with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, finally winning the right to vote for women in America.⁵

The second wave of feminism began with the consciousness-raising groups of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The publishing of Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, helped to define “the problem with no name” that many middle-class American housewives were experiencing.⁶ This “problem” went to the core of women’s self-worth and lack of identity in the public world of paid labor and their definition of “self” primarily as wife and mother in the private realm of family. The second wave of feminism sought equal rights for women in the public sphere “kicking open” the doors to many previously all male professions.⁷ While feminists in the 1970s and early 1980s achieved some rights with regard to abortion and equal access to education and jobs, they fell short of the chief legislative goal: an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the constitution.

A third wave of feminism is thought to have begun in the 1990s and continues to the present day. This wave has the potential to empower women by helping them shatter the “glass ceiling” in politics, business, and other fields previously limited to women, whether it be the presidency of the United States or CEOs of major corporations. From first to the third wave, women have made and continue to make legal, economic, and political progress. And yet, fundamental questions of citizenship and equality remain the same from first, to second, to the third wave. Underpinning it all is the relationship of women to the family, specifically women’s individual responsibility for childcare, housework, and all tasks related to the well-being of the family.

FEMINISM IN THE THIRD-WAVE

Third-wave feminism is thought to have begun in the early 1990s as a partial reaction to issues raised in the Hill–Thomas Senate hearings on sexual harassment as well as claims of “post-feminism” and *Time Magazine’s* 1998 cover story asking the question, “Is Feminism Dead?” Out of sexism in the Hill–Thomas hearings and reaction to 12 years of Reagan–Bush conservative policies, a “Third Wave Foundation” was formed, aimed at recruiting/supporting feminists between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Additionally, a new culture of music and journalism appeared with the creation of punk groups like Riot Grrrls and “zines,” magazines like *Bust*, *Bitch*, and others.⁸

Third-wave feminism’s roots are clearly imbedded in popular culture. Even though Baumgardner and Richards, in their book, *Manifesta*, outline a 13-point agenda for action that includes safeguarding women’s reproductive rights, increasing the power and visibility of lesbian and bisexual women, and guaranteeing equal access to health care, generally, third-wave feminism is not thought of as an “activist” movement.⁹ This is because there doesn’t seem to be a collective identity. In fact, third-wave feminism rejects the notion of collective identity. It is said that its members are not able to be categorized because they embrace disunity.¹⁰ The question is: Is third-wave feminism a movement?

The most basic definition of “movement” requires the creation of new meanings and perspectives by “reframing” issues in ways that reveal previously invisible power relations.¹¹ Third-wave feminism is reframing issues in at least two distinct ways. One way is the pursuit of social justice by young feminists who prize individualism and prefer to work in a wide range of social contexts. They share a collective consciousness by *rejecting* a collective consciousness.

Other third-wave feminists are working to expose inequalities in the family and challenge the notion of “choice” feminism as a concept that emerged from the second wave. Some scholars argue that the concept of “individualism” as utilized by the third-wave feminists seeking social justice has been successful in promoting equality by virtue of the fact that, if nothing else, new questions of social justice are being raised. However, others argue the opposite for feminists focused on the family. Here, they claim, individualism reinforces the status quo by *not* challenging the widespread notion that responsibility for the family rests primarily with women. Individualism reinforces the concept of “choice” (between public and private sphere), which promotes little in the way of real equality. Further, some argue, that a path of “rugged individualism” compromises women’s quest for full citizenship.

Much of social movement theory argues that collective identity is “crucial” to social movement formation and ultimately the ability to challenge existing structures of power.¹² Feminist social movements in the past have been said to engage in struggles on two levels: over meanings and over the distribution of resources for society.¹³ For example, in the first wave of feminism, the view of women’s nature had to be reconceived of before women were viewed as worthy of a political resource: the right to vote. Thus, cultural change led to political change. In the second wave of feminism, a collective consciousness enabled women to see themselves differently than just wives and mothers. This made it possible for women to challenge existing gender relations and eventually gain power in

the public sphere. If this is the model for change, the question is: What does feminism in the third wave contribute to a collective consciousness?

If third-wave feminism could be seen as having one ideological perspective, it would be born out of a tension with the second wave. As one author states, "We want to be linked with our foremothers and centuries of women's movements, but we also want to make a space for young women to create their own, different brand of revolt, and so we chose the name Third Wave."¹⁴ Third-wave feminists criticize the second wave for its lack of diversity, as the second wave is commonly known for being led by mostly white affluent women. Third-wave feminism is multicultural in nature and sexually diverse as well, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual perspectives. There is more of a recognition of the "interlocking nature of identity—that gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class never function in isolation but always work as interconnected categories of oppression and privileged."¹⁵

While second-wave feminism provided the groundwork for such a perspective, third-wave feminism is defined by it. For an example, one could look at a third-wave feminist reader like Dicker and Piepmeier's book *Catching a Wave* to get a sense of the wide range of topics included in the third wave discussion. The articles include issues related to the news and entertainment media's treatment of feminism, childhood development and feminism, concepts of feminist leadership on college campuses today as well as broader leadership for the movement, and feminism applied to particular groups. The groups include American Jewish women and the third wave, Arab American feminism, Hip-Hop feminism, and a discussion of transsexual feminism. Additionally, the articles include subjects like pornography, highlighting differences in perspective between second- and third-wave feminists.

For example, second-wave feminism revealed the oppression of women in the entertainment media in terms of obsession with the portrayal of women as sex objects. This is described in the literature as "victim feminism" and is obviously extended to opposition to pornography which was seen as promoting violence toward women. Some feminists, such as McKinnon, worked toward laws aimed at banning pornography.¹⁶ Third-wave feminists reject "victim feminism" and endorse "power feminism," which is based on a sense of individualism. Thus, for example, not all third-wave feminists are against pornography as long as women involved in it claim empowerment via economic (or other) resources. Some theorists observe that the third wave is "a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures."¹⁷

This discussion has demonstrated that much of the third-wave feminist focus has been located in the social culture of women between the ages of fifteen and thirty. These young women have tried to provide stronger images of women in the popular media and they have raised consciousness about women's oppression related to cultural institutions such as religion and sexuality. They have rejected second-wave feminism's "victim" feminism in favor of "power" feminism. While victim feminism applies to a group, power feminism applies to the individual.

Women in this age group prize individualism and have a keen sense of social justice. Leadership is a function of both, to be applied locally on college campuses or in communities

as the opportunity arises, but not usually on a broader national level. These younger women do not address the issues of power in the family that have been described as feminism's "final frontier." While some of them are mothers, to a large extent, they have yet to experience the conflict between family and career that has become more critical to the women who have come of age a generation before them.

Undergraduate students who have been interviewed on the subject of feminism confirm two predominant patterns of thought. The first, as the literature indicates, is a steadfast commitment to individualism, and the second is that "collective" feminist action is a thing of the past. They do not want to associate with the word "feminist" as it was understood in the second wave.

Consider the following comments about the term "feminist."

I see feminists as people who look down upon women who want to stay home and take care of their children, and bake cookies. That's wrong. Because of that attitude, I definitely do not consider myself a feminist.

No, I am definitely not a feminist. It's not that I don't believe in women's rights, I just don't think that women have to be on the exact same level as men. I am not really sure this is what feminists want, but that is the impression I get. I think it is okay for me to want to be a mother and it is okay for a woman to be paid less. I think it is ok for a woman to not want to be equal on all levels with men. I also don't think women can emotionally and physically ever be equal with men. It is okay to me as long as women are happy with their place in society.

I wouldn't classify myself as a feminist. I am more old-fashioned and conservative. Personally I think the women's movement has screwed females because we have to do twice the amount of work.

No I am not a feminist, but I believe women should have the same rights as men. But, men and women are too different and can never be equal because they need to be seen as two different subjects.

No, I wouldn't go out of my way to take up women's issues. There are no really grave issues encouraging me to participate, no end all be all for women's rights. I support women's rights issues, but I would not say I would actively protest them.

I don't think I am a feminist. After having a seminar on Women and Work, I feel like males' views have changed so much and women respect men as much as men respect women. When the topic of women's rights comes up, I don't find myself getting heated about the topic. I am more or less content with the rights that I have.

Of 300 undergraduate students interviewed, 83 percent expressed a commitment to an "individual" approach to fighting any remaining sexism in American culture. Only 21 percent were willing to identify themselves as feminists, with feminist simply defined as "someone who promotes equality between women and men in American society."¹⁸

These data mirror the existing literature on third-wave feminism, indicating a strong commitment to individual initiative with regard to overcoming gender barriers/differences if deemed necessary. Additionally, these statements demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility for the individual path one might take, but not a sense of collective identity or commitment to feminism as a strategy for change. Quite the contrary, there is a decided rejection of the feminist label as well as a negative concept of what a feminist is.

THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM AND MOTHERHOOD

While much of the third-wave feminist focus is located in the social culture of women between the ages of fifteen and thirty, more attention needs to be given to a slightly older group of women who came of age during the Reagan era and are now mired in the issues of motherhood. This group, aged 30–50, is often ignored in the discussion of third-wave feminism, especially in the generational mother/daughter discourse between second- and third-wave feminists.¹⁹

Judith Warner's book, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, argues that women in this age group were especially socialized to the notion of individual responsibility that was characteristic of both the social and economic conservatism of the Reagan years.²⁰ Believing that they had real "choices" regarding career and family, many of these women pursued careers first and then tried to accommodate those careers to family.

This "accommodation" took many forms. Some women worked in careers that offered flexible hours or allowed them to "work" at home. Others found themselves being sidelined from career advancement by employers who demanded more of them even though they had families. And some women "chose" to quit their jobs in favor of staying at home with their children. In all of this, very few women were truly "happy" with their choice and nearly all of the women took full responsibility for this unhappiness.

If each mother's life was not working out as planned, this circumstance was due to her individual "choices." If her children, house, and family life were not perfect, it was her fault, because she was "responsible." Further, these women were utilizing their career skills in attempts to "perfect" their home lives, bringing CEO-like skills to sports schedules, music and dance lessons, birthday parties, and other child-related activities. As Warner explains, "rather than becoming rebels or pioneers, we became a generation of control freaks."²¹ Warner refers to this as "the mess," which in some ways, is the modern version of second-wave feminism's "problem with no name," a phrase coined by Betty Friedan in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*.

As a starting point for addressing this "mess," Warner calls for a "politics of quality of life." By comparing her experiences of first becoming a mother in France with those of motherhood in America, Warner is easily able to see the part that culture plays in defining the role of mothers and the locus of responsibility with regard to family. In brief, according to Warner, French culture views mothers as citizens who deserve a full and rewarding "adult" life of their own. There is a clearer separation of adult "space" and child "space" as it applies to the structure of the French home both physically (no child-centered "family room") and mentally (time for adult conversation).

French culture views the raising of children as a community responsibility. And thus the French are willing to spend government money for quality day care and paid parental leaves, as many other European countries do. As Siim explains in her book *Gender and Citizenship*:

French political and intellectual history transcends the liberal language of abstract individualism by placing the individual as part of the national political community. And historians and political scientists have recently suggested that there is a specific French conception of citizenship . . . with implications for women's citizenship.²²

As Siim further explains about the French example, "Parental policies were built on a double assumption that women are both workers and mothers—and that subsequently public policies ought to support women in their dual role."²³

Warner calls for American policy making that would begin to relieve the individual burden that American mothers bear. She states that "one of the most surprising things about our current culture of motherhood is that while it inspires widespread complaint, it has not led to any kind of organized change."²⁴

Warner is far from alone in her analysis. Many other books and articles have been written that underscore her arguments. Taylor, Layne, and Wozniak have written a book entitled *Consuming Motherhood* that looks at the effects of motherhood under modern capitalism. Arlie Hochschild's book *The Time Bind*, which has the subtitle "when work becomes home and home becomes work," points to a work/family crisis. Patrice DiQuinzio's book *The Impossibility of Motherhood* highlights the "paradoxical politics of mothering."²⁵

Bjornberg and Kollind in their work, *Individuals and Families*, discuss "time politics," meaning shorter work hours and extended leaves, as a means for reaching gender equality by "dissolving the hierarchical dualism of work and private life."²⁶ These books are just a sampling of the literature that now exists, articulating the very real hardships facing mothers in American society. All of these books conclude with a call for government intervention/assistance, yet, to date, in America, their analyses have fallen on deaf ears or have been ignored entirely by legislators. Thus, the "dualism" of work and private life in America remains an "individual" matter.

TOWARD A THEORY OF THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM

Mothers in America are consumed with the daunting task of "balancing" the public and private, the responsibilities of career and home. From the concerns of this group come the most pressing, if not dire, questions of our time: Who will take care of the family? Without government awareness and response, the overwhelming answer is: they. And without time to step back and reflect on the problem, they are trapped in a never-ending circle of personal responsibility for making "choices" that don't actually exist. They attempt to "perfect" a lifestyle in which perfection is not possible. At the same time, a false sense of equality is being experienced by a younger group of women as they pursue a path of individualism. If nothing changes, their sense of equality will be challenged as they enter the stressful world of family life in the next decade.

Out of this nexus comes the declaration that "feminism has failed." Linda Hirshman's research, first presented in *The American Prospect* and most recently published in her book *Get To Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*, notes that "half the wealthiest, most-privileged best educated females in the country stay home with their babies rather than work in the market economy."²⁷ For example, she provides data that show that in the year 2000, only 38 percent of female Harvard MBAs were working full time. Hirshman identifies the problem of the lack of change in the private lives of women.²⁸ She argues, "while the public world has changed, albeit imperfectly . . . private lives have hardly budged. The real glass ceiling is at home."²⁹

Hirshman also points to the flaws in the so-called "choice" feminism. Women are faced with the "moral" dilemma of whether to work or stay at home with their children. She sees these "choices" as incredibly constrained. This is the "frame" that pits working moms against stay-at-home moms, thus creating a war between women rather than a war against patriarchy. Additionally, she argues that press coverage of the "choice" dilemma does nothing to advance the cause of women. Hirshman argues that women need real solutions, not feminist theories. She finds these solutions in the world of work. She offers three rules to young women: "prepare yourself to qualify for good work, treat work seriously, and don't put yourself in a position of unequal resources when you marry."³⁰

The goal is to avoid taking on more than your fair share of the "second-shift," but this is difficult to accomplish. Hirshman cites a survey by the Center for Work-Life Policy indicating that 40 percent of highly qualified women with spouses think that their husbands create more work around the house than they perform.³¹ Further, according to another team of researchers, "when couples marry, the amount of time that a woman spends doing housework increases by approximately 17 percent, while a man's decreased by 33 percent."³²

Women's "choice" in opting out of the world of work could be viewed as a rational alternative to the "perfect madness" that Warner described in her book. Viewed this way, "opting out" is not a "failure of feminism" but instead the only real solution to current economic and political circumstances. Additionally, Hirshman's solutions or "rules" reinforce individualism: women should solve this problem personally by strategically selecting a partner and maintaining a high level of ambition for work. At a time when there are no other alternatives, this may be good advice—or the only advice. But what about the long term?

CONCLUSION

Hirshman states that "the family is (today) . . . what the workplace was to 1964 and the vote was to 1920."³³ This should be viewed as a political challenge, calling for a redistribution of resources. In order to achieve political change, like their sisters before them, third-wave feminists must work toward a redefinition of terms. This time, it is not a redefinition of women's nature, as it was in the first wave of feminism. Although there are still questions about "the ethic of care" and women's "natural inclination" or "suitability" toward children and home, feminism in the second wave worked to provide more equitable answers.³⁴ The challenge for feminism in the third wave is to redefine women's *responsibility* toward the private sphere of children and home. To this, third-wave feminism needs to move from the cultural to the political, from the individual to the collective.

Having reviewed much of the current literature on third-wave feminism, I make the following observations. Third-wave feminists can best be categorized by age, with a young group of women (15–30 years of age) working as individuals on issues of social justice that range from abortion rights to multicultural, multisexual inclusion in both an American and global context. A second age group (30–50 years of age) are working as individuals, or are the subject of work by journalists and scholars, aimed at consciousness

raising regarding the impossibilities of a rational balance between the spheres of work and home as faced by American mothers.

This dual categorization is supported by original qualitative data based on responses of college women as well as journalistic accounts of the plight of American mothers. Similarities in these two groups include a steadfast commitment to "individualism" in pursuing remedies to gender inequality and a rejection of the label "feminist" as the term emerged from the popular culture (not the academic literature) of the second wave.

Individual action in the pursuit of social justice can make a difference. Perhaps the best examples are the actions of individuals who eventually sparked the beginnings of the first and second waves of feminism or the American civil rights movement.³⁵ From this standpoint, young women in the third wave have the potential for igniting change in any or all of the issues areas they have defined. Individualism on the part of the second group, or mothers, however, has had the effect of reinforcing the status quo (as evidenced, for example, by the data Hirshman provides).

The conceptual and real-world "trap" of choice feminism (between work and home) has led women to challenge each other rather than the patriarchy. Individualism conceived of as "choice" does not empower women; it silences them and prevents feminism from becoming a political movement and addressing the real issues of distribution of resources. The popular press has reinforced this circular problem by reporting "the mommie wars" or promoting "features" on the so-called "supermom" culture. Because of this, and a lack of definition of goals, a "mother's movement" has not gotten off the ground.³⁶

"Individualism" conceived of as "responsibility" raises the political question, Who bears the burdens? As long as the burden is privatized, women will not gain power/equality in American society. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in the same sense that men enjoy it is available to women only in the time remaining after they have performed their duties as the "keeper of the hearth." Ann Crittenden, author of a book entitled *The Price of Motherhood*, suggests that a broader climate of change is needed for a mother's movement to take hold. She says, "Social change is incremental and under the surface. The real revolution will happen in people's minds. When their minds are changed, structures change."³⁷

NOTES

1. Jane Addams, "Why Women Should Vote," in George Klosko and Margaret G. Klosko (Eds.), *The Struggle for Women's Rights* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 148.
2. Linda Hirshman, "Homeward Bound," *The American Prospect*, <http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?articleId=10659> (Web Exclusive: 11.21.05, 2005).
3. George Klosko and Margaret G. Klosko, *The Struggle for Women's Rights* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), p.xi.
4. Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women (Selections)," in George Klosko and Margaret G. Klosko (Eds.), *The Struggle for Women's Rights* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), p. 33.
5. Klosko and Klosko, p. 11.

6. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Penguin, 1963).
7. Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed History at Century's End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).
8. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2003).
9. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000).
10. Stephanie Gilmore, "Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Third Wave Feminism in the United States," *Journal of Women's History*, 12 (4), pp. 215–220, 218.
11. Nickie Charles, *Feminism, the State, and Social Policy* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, Inc., 2000), p. 203.
12. Charles, p. 206.