

THE EFFECT OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT ON THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY

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While the role of women within American society has changed, and the majority of people feel that this transformation is for the better, it cannot be denied that there remains a great deal of sex discrimination against women within society. Firstly, in order to examine how the role of females has been modified, I will describe the most significant achievements of the feminist movement throughout history. Secondly, my paper will include data about the shift in the employment system. I will also focus on the new role of women in marriage patterns and the current structure of American families. Thirdly, I am going to examine closely how both females and males feel about this transformation.

In the US the belief that women and men are equal in abilities and should have equal rights and opportunities became the subject of intense debate in the mid 1800s. Since then, the movement has often been called the 'first wave of feminism'. Women like Susan B. Antony, Margaret Sanger and Elizabeth Blackwell became associated with the fight for the right to vote, provision of means of contraception, and greater opportunities to study.¹ Furthermore, many feminists were interested in other social issues. In 1903 the Socio-Political Women's Union was introduced. They organized demonstrations and raised public attention by spectacular protests. The first wave of feminism culminated in the campaign for suffrage. Finally, in 1919 (the act was ratified in 1920) the suffragettes won the right to vote in.² The public at large assumed that the goals of women's rights and feminism had been achieved with the 19th Amendment, which stated that the right of citizens to vote should not be denied on the basis of sex. The National Woman's Party and the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Club, however, continued the campaign to support non-discriminatory legislation, including the Equal Rights Amendment and other: social, political, economic, and psychological issues. The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s, when the women's liberation movement encouraged women to reject their traditional, supporting role and to demand equal status and equal rights in areas such as employment and wages. Betty Friedan and Gloria

¹ J. Crowther & K. Kavanagh, *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, p. 192. Also: J. Hole & E. Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism*, New York: A New York Times Company 1971, p. 78.

² W. Miller, *A History of the United States*, New York: Dell Publishing CO. Inc. 1958, p. 94.

Steinem fought for equal rights and opportunities for women under the law.³ The formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW), the first militant feminist group to combat sex discrimination in all spheres of life, was an important event for all women's organizations. Another important issue raised by feminists was the proposal of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which was intended to change the Constitution. Although the ERA was not passed, the issue of equality for women attracted wide national attention and changes in other areas were introduced. For example, it became illegal for employers, schools or clubs to discriminate against women.⁴ Subsequently, the Equal Pay Act of 1970 made it illegal for women to be paid less than men for doing the same work, and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 aimed to prevent either sex from having an unfair advantage when applying for jobs. Women in contemporary American society have much better employment opportunities, though they still tend to get lower paid jobs than men. Moreover, many women also face the problem of the 'second shift', or household chores.⁵

First of all, it is generally observed that an increasing number of women in the US take up jobs outside the home. At the beginning of the century, only 9% of women worked professionally; in the 1920s the figure was 11%; in the 40s – 33%; in the 60s – 38%; and in 1980 the figure was 64%.⁶ Such numerous employment rates, along with production of goods or work in the service area are very important factors in stimulating the welfare of the nation. In 1990, national profits obtained by women reached 54%. Due to this, women's status has also changed.⁷ In contrast to the great desirability of their work, women are often underpaid. A 1990 survey showed that females received on average 20% less than their male counterparts. There is a tendency in society to undervalue professions typically performed by women (e.g. teachers, nurses or jobs in the service area).⁸ The feminists' movement does its best to change this attitude and make people aware of this injustice. The "Equal pay for jobs of comparable worth" campaign has gained ground in the USA. Due to this movement, incomes in female-dominated occupations have increased and the gender gap has been narrowed.⁹ Still, a considerable number of women find it hard to advance beyond a certain point in their careers; the so-called "glass ceiling" prevents them from obtaining high-level jobs.¹⁰ For this reason, feminists are trying to focus public attention on the discriminatory barriers education, which women face in, access to training, and entry into a wider array of jobs. While it is true to say that this dissimilarity in wages is caused by higher demands of "typically male professions", in fact a great many women have taken up professions in the

³ J. Crowther & K. Kavanagh, *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*, op.cit., p. 192.

⁴ N. Klose, *American History*, New York: Barron's Education Series, Inc. 1965, p. 189.

⁵ W. Miller, *A History of the United States*, op.cit., p. 99.

⁶ A. Semenowicz, *Współczesne trendy aktywizacji zawodowej kobiet w wybranych krajach*, Warszawa: Ośrodek Informacji Centralnej 1990, p. 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ R. Briffault, *Feminism*, New York: Allen and Unwin. 1989, p. 76.

⁹ F. Thébaud ed., *A History of Women in the West. Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press. 1994, p. 184.

¹⁰ J. Johnson, *The Feminist Solution*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1991, p. 128.

traditionally male dominated areas and the discrepancy male and female earnings remains the same.¹¹

There are those, however, who claim that the problem of sexual discrimination no longer exists. They point out that, after all, women do have legal rights protecting them from discrimination. This is how, they maintain, women are now beginning to reach top positions as judges, business leaders and politicians, while many other previously all-male professions are opening their ranks to females. Moreover, some men believe that the balance has already swung too far in favor of women. For that reason, the Equal Opportunities Commission, to which people can appeal, also receives complaints from men. Nonetheless, these examples are not the norm and discrimination against women is present in contemporary American society.¹²

An additional major effect of the feminist movement is the transformation of marriage patterns. Traditional views of the position of women within society are, however, so deeply ingrained that they are extremely difficult to change. Moreover, not only is the view that women should stay at home and look after their family still widely held, but also reinforced through images on television programs and advertisements. Although reproductive tasks were more physically demanding in the past, at least they were not severed from the productive work of the family or imbued with heavy psychological significance.¹³ J. Freeman has shown that in contrast to the value of women's work in days gone by, today female devotion to housework alone makes them even more dependent in psychological and economical terms. Gradually, most families in the US adopt the model of partnership contrary to the old understanding of the wife's role as a supporter of her husband's career. In theory, both spouses work and share their duties at home. In practice, families often need two incomes in order to enjoy a good standard of living, so women find themselves doing two jobs: one at home and one at the office. For that reason, it could be said that the female position has, in fact, deteriorated rather than improved, with the result that women carry the burdens of equality but receive none of the benefits. The feminist movement has been encouraging them not to feel responsible for all work at home. In addition, women's organizations have been creating possibilities to help wives from remaining dependent on their husbands' profits.

J. Scanzani claims that American society is rapidly approaching real equality in partnership. More and more often, the professional aims females are regarded to be as important as that of males.¹⁴ There is another side to this issue presented by A. Oakley and J. Mitchell. They maintain that still a large proportion of women remain largely dependent on their husbands, income and put their husbands, careers ahead of their own.¹⁵

Many women find it very difficult to return to work after having children. This is due to numerous overlapping factors. Firstly, there are hardly any provisions made

¹¹ J. Hole & E. Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism*, New York: A New York Times Company 1971, p. 178.

¹² R. Morgan, *Going too far*, New York: Vintage Books 1986, p. 59.

¹³ J. Freeman ed., *Women. A Feminist Perspective*, Mountain View and London: Mayfield Publishing Company 1979, p. 163.

¹⁴ J. Johnson, *The Feminist Solution*, op.cit., p. 197.

¹⁵ A. Oakley and J. Mitchell ed., *Who is afraid of Feminism. Seeing through the Backlash*, London: Hamish Hamilton 1997, p. 96.

for childcare in the workplace and, in these cases, women are forced to find someone to look after their children while they are at work. Obviously, this can prove to be a time consuming and expensive process, yet it must be done if mothers are to be able to resume their careers. Nowadays, this situation has improved; in other words, social policy, childcare facilities at work, and flexible working hours help mothers start work again. Secondly, a lot of women still feel obliged to place raising children and home responsibilities ahead of their own careers. Full-time employed women are not believed to be good mothers. Too many generations carried the image of the perfect mother to reject it out of hand. Being a mother was believed to be the ultimate accomplishment for a female. The body of work assigned to mothers – caring for child, home, and husband – should fulfill all their needs and therefore make them happy. However, a considerable number of widely held psychological studies have proved that this is not altogether accurate. For women who do not hold any job, only intimate relationships may serve as the field on which to test their identity. Since women cannot fulfill their real needs, they are more likely to suffer from frustration. The children are then subjected to adults' anger, annoyance, or, on the contrary, overreacting motherhood. According to J. Freeman, this 'mother mystique' can not be realized in contemporary society, but still leaves a considerable number of women striving between their professional career and motherhood. Mothers are reinforced by the feminists' influence to overcome these negative emotions and to no longer feel guilt if they do not shoulder all the childcare or home responsibilities. They are encouraged to allow themselves to be more selfish in order to improve their skills and professional careers, start new training just to relax.¹⁶ The suggestion that exclusive devotion to mothering is necessary for child development has also been questioned. Working mothers' children are found to mature earlier, and be more reliable and independent.¹⁷ Furthermore, children brought up by equal parents are less likely to make a distinction between the rights of genders in their future life. Some skeptics blame working mothers for the decline of the American family, the growing divorce rate and weaker links between family members.

The feminist movement has also increased women's consciousness of their own value obtained through education and work. Nevertheless, females are able to realize their ambitions through a professional career and be aware of their own worth and unlimited possibilities. Currently, scientists refute the notion of an innate, universal masculine or feminine nature, placing the emphasis instead on learned behavior. They take great care to reveal how the learning process occurs through the predominating environment, as demonstrated by various experiments in psychology. As G. Castro puts it: "The definition of masculine and feminine is not a closed biological definition, but rather a social division that is wide open."¹⁸ It is widely maintained that women are not born weak, passive, and dependent. They are socially conditioned to develop these qualities, which are reinforced when they enact them.

¹⁶ J. Freeman, *Women. A Feminist Perspective*, op.cit., p. 167.

¹⁷ J. Johnson, *The Feminist Solution*, op.cit., p. 94. The other perspective on this issue is presented by Betty Friedan, who suggests that full-time working mother is capable of neither fulfilling her children's needs, nor mother's role fully. B. Friedan, *It Changed My Life. Writings on the Women's Movement*, New York: Random House 1976, p. 147.

¹⁸ G. Castro, *American Feminism A Contemporary History*, New York and London: New York University Press 1990, p. 127.

Similarly, men learn to act strong, independent, and aggressive. Both men and women are continuously evaluated in terms of normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and activities for their gender. These permit males to dominate females through the privilege of initiating and controlling relationships. The social images and norms which give men power over women are carried into the workplace and reinforced through male control over women's livelihoods.

Also important is the fact that even if American society is sympathetic to feminist goals of equality, it happens that "those angry women" are treated with sarcasm. Stating their rights, aggressiveness and fulfilling their own needs were discouraged by male-dominated society for so long, that it is now regarded as un-female-like behavior and is often criticized.¹⁹ Feminists have managed to change this deeply rooted understanding of the female role as peacemakers who are always ready to support their family and hold relationships together even at the loss of their own identity. Since it is not possible to have full equality for women without a sex-role revolution for men, males may feel frustrated and uncertain about their own position in contemporary American society. This is the effect of several factors. Firstly, men are accustomed to seeing themselves as the main supporters of the family income, but not supporters of domestic duties. Their role and position have recently been questioned. Secondly, when spouses make decisions together open clashes are much more likely in comparison to a family where the husband – a superior – makes all the decisions on his own. While it is true to say that the debate between feminist and traditional views of a woman's role continues, in fact societal attitudes have changed.

Although there is still discrimination, the principle that it should not exist is widely accepted. A survey held by *Elle* magazine proves that as only 6 percent of men believe that the women's movement is "a bunch of man-hating bra-bumers", 14 percent feel uneasy or uncomfortable about the changes, and a great majority agree with all but extreme ideas.²⁰ It is presently widely stressed by younger people that women should, if they wish, be allowed to develop their careers and not give up work when they have a family. Still others complain that women today do not place enough importance on the role of the mother and homemaker. History proves that every change takes time. To create a new relationship requires a great deal of understanding, acceptance, and awareness of the other person's worth. However difficult it may appear, it is undeniable that something must be done to prevent any sexual discrimination against women within society. American women have more opportunities than anyone thought possible 30 years ago, but the belief that sexual equality has been achieved is not altogether accurate, as there is still a long way to go.

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¹⁹ R. Morgan, *Going too far*, op.cit., p. 56.

²⁰ B. Friedan, *It Changed My Life. Writings on the Women's Movement*, op.cit., p. 335.

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