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Has Feminism Gone too Far?: Post-feminism and the Value of Homemakers

After graduating from Milligan in the late 80's as an Early Childhood Education major, my mother, Joy Evans, got married and began teaching third grade. A few years later I was born and by the time I was three, she had made the job change from part time educator to full time mother. Even though my mother was an active member in our church, volunteered regularly, and had to overcome multiple health setbacks, she was there for every step of my childhood. She poured her time, energy, and every ounce of patience into my life and education. To me, my mother is an unadulterated example of a successful woman, and I desire nothing more than to follow in her footsteps.

Unlike many women who strive to have a professional career, I simply want to raise a family. I value my education because of how it will affect my children, not because of how it will affect my bank account. As is typical for a college student, I am often asked about what I plan to do after finishing college, but more often than not I am met with dirty glares and pointed lectures about how I am not only lazy for not wanting a career, but also selfish because I plan on living off of my husband's income instead of earning my own. I truly desire to be a stay-at-home-mom, yet when I express that, I get treated as though my IQ has dropped twenty points. I feel as if I am constantly under fire for wanting to stay home a raise my children. Even though being a stay-at-home-mother is my choice to make, I am frequently told that I am making a

mistake. Because of the cultural expectations that are placed on women today, I feel as if I must either stay quiet about my passion to make motherhood my vocation or brace myself against the critical backlash.

Although it seems as if a woman can pursue whatever vocation she chooses, often women are applauded only for choosing a professional career. Feminism has encouraged women to be independent, but the hunger for independence has grown to an unhealthy level. Women's rights are important. Women should have the right to vote, to own property, to own their own businesses, and to become educated, but if they have the right to choose their career without criticism, then they should also have the right to become homemakers without having to endure criticism. Once women won the right to pursue careers in the same way as men, that goal became the expectation not simply a right. Although there is nothing wrong with women being in the workplace, women should not feel pressured into a career. Yet, unjustified judgment is passed when a woman expresses her humble desire to become a stay-at-home-mom. The feminist movement was started in order to give women more opportunities, not to take the home away from them or to turn them into super mothers who have to balance a career and a household. By encouraging extreme independence, feminism has actually limited the value of homemakers.

Although the term "feminism" is a commonly used and understood term, everyone has their own interpretation when dealing with meaning. It is important to recognize that feminism is first defined as: "the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes" and second as "organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests" (Webster). These definitions give a good synopsis of the differences between the first and second wave of feminist theory. Although it is challenging to know exactly when the feminist movement began, the first wave of feminism is considered to have come into being around the nineteenth century.

However, second wave feminism did not come to the fore in America until the 1960's ("Rise of Womanhood"). First wave feminism was about women seeking human rights, whereas second wave feminism was about women wanting to solve matters like "civil rights, sexual liberation, childcare, health, welfare, education, work and reproductive rights including the right to abortion" (Rise of Womanhood). Even though feminist theory now carries a heavy negative connotation, the purpose for the feminist movement is easy to understand. In an article published in 1996, Gerda Lerner easily identified the two main issues that fueled feminism. Lerner says:

Women were disadvantaged because their history had been omitted and distorted, and because only a few women had been given access to a profession, and that once they were accepted they were passed over for promotions, awards, and greater responsibility (Quoted in Zinsser 27).

The original purpose of the feminist movement was to give women vocational opportunities. Feminism encouraged women to be independent and to pursue whichever profession they desired, even if it was a male-dominated job. The feminist movement was developed to champion for women's rights, equality, and vocational choice. It started as a way to change the perception of women as inferior to fully capable humans.

The cultural shift from having women in the house to having women in the workplace was a part of the second wave of feminism. During World War II, there was an increase of women working in order to provide for their families because most men were fighting in the war. However, after WWII was over, men resumed their careers and women were expected to resume their household duties. The perception of women changed from being housewives to being capable workers, and then back to being housewives. WWII gave women the opportunity to

realize that they were capable of more than just running a household, and it gave women a glimpse at a professional career. The hunger for occupational opportunity transformed feminism into post-feminism during the 1970's. Second wave feminism initially began as a way for women to be seen as valuable for more than just being homemakers. Feminism promoted the idea that women should have an equal opportunity in the workforce, along with a wonderful marriage, a model home, a gorgeous figure, and well-behaved children. Second wave feminism marketed the idea that women could have it all. Although women can be excellent mothers and still be successful working professionals, they should realize that they do not *have* to do it all in order to be considered valuable.

Feminism, or better yet post-feminism, has greatly affected women's identity. Post-feminism is a backlash term used largely to make the distinction between first and second wave feminism. In her article, *Young Women Struggling for an Identity*, Victoria Dickerson discusses the issues that post-feminism has caused in modern America. She recounts the struggles that she has seen in women while conducting therapy sessions. Dickerson concludes that post-feminism has led women to believe that they have to do everything themselves. Women feel the pressure to have a career, find the "right" man, care for a family, be thin, and find financial independence all the while remaining calm and keeping everything balanced (Dickerson 337). According to Dickerson, when women cannot manage everything they become prey to eating disorders, infertility, depression, and lose their sense of self-worth (Dickerson 338). Post-feminism was such a loud advocate for women's independence that it drowned out the voice for women's freedom. Yes; being able to vote, attend college, and own property are considered freedoms, but since when has dealing with identity issues been considered freeing? Post-feminism changed the perception of women from being fully human, to being super human. Although feminism has

helped women to become independent, it has also placed women under the bind of guilt, depression, and unrealistic expectations.

Dickerson also studied how feminism affected women's identity. She says that women feel pressured into the mindset of "having it all" rather than seeking out what it is that they personally want to do. She concluded that this pressure was caused by a shift in feminist theory. She says the first wave of feminist theory, which differs from the feminist movement that was active during the 1970's and 1980's, is not the same form of feminism that young women are facing today. Dickerson writes:

A few decades ago, there was one major goal that young women were supposed to achieve: get married and have children. Now they are required to do much more -not only get married and have children but also have a career, be financially independent, create a social life, and know where they want to live (Dickerson 338)

Dickerson continues to say that women are trying so hard to find their identity that they are making themselves miserable. This miserable state is what Victoria Willingham had defined as "interrole". Willingham defines interrole as being the personal expectations that a woman sets for herself. Willingham says "While there are many potential benefits to taking on the multiple roles of career and motherhood, researchers have also demonstrated that individuals assuming multiple roles frequently experience interrole conflict" (Willingham 227). She states that: "Interrole conflict in employed mothers has been linked to a decreased sense of subjective well-being, including symptoms of depression and anxiety, anger, stress, guilt, and other negative self-assessments" (Willingham 228). Because of the influence of post-feminism, women have

unknowingly adopted an unattainable perception of what it means to be successful. Most women struggle with self-worth because they cannot keep up with the expectations that are placed on them. They think that if they cannot keep up the demands of a family and a career, they are somehow less of a woman. True feminism would bring balance between the professional world and family life. Even though independence and being a working mother has benefits such as “modeling a democratic relationship with children, better parenting, improved financial status and flexibility, socialization in the workplace, and positively impacting their children’s social and intellectual development” (Willingham 228), the expectation to manage everything independently sets women up to fail. Women should seek to find their self-worth in the things they are able to achieve, rather than tearing themselves down for the things they cannot accomplish.

Because of the pressures on women to be independent, there is harsh criticism surrounding stay-at-home- mothers. The cultural opinion is that women have to get out of the house and have a job in order to be successful. This is evidenced by the change in the amount of time that women now spend doing housework. According to Usdansky and Parker, in 1965 the typical American wife did about 34 hours’ worth of household chores a week, but by 1995, the number had dropped to only 19.5 hours a week (Usdansky and Parker 1450). They also say that “this shift happened alongside changes in women’s lives, such as their growing investment in paid work” (Usdansky and Parker 1450). Because the culture began valuing paid vocations, women took the opportunity to join the workforce, and over time, women having professional careers have become the norm. Now it is uncommon to hear of a woman who is not only willing to stay-at-home, but who *wants* to stay at home.

As evidenced by the reactions of feminists to stay-at-home-moms; homemakers are stereotyped as being ungrateful, immature, lazy women who have no real ambition or goal in life. This perception of homemakers could not be more misinformed. Most stay-at-home-mothers are grateful for women's rights and are appreciative of the option to have a professional career, however; they elect to stay home. Choosing to stay home rather than partaking in a career should not be misinterpreted as homemakers being unappreciative of the feminist movement. Furthermore, homemakers' not having ambition is a misnomer. Although homemakers are not climbing the professional ladder, they are ambitious enough to choose a job that does not have a time clock. Another part of this stereotype is the assumption that stay-at-home-mothers are selfishly living off of their husband's income. Because American culture equates money with success, it reasons that because homemakers are not receiving an income they are not successful, or valuable. The status quo is still pushing women into type cast boxes, but now (thanks to post-feminism) instead of saying that women have to be at home, it is demanding that women have an occupation before they gain respect. This is where the theory of feminism goes too far.

First wave feminism was about giving women the opportunity to be considered human. First wave feminism championed for women's rights; it never mandated that women had to be independent, it simply gave them the chance to be independent. Second wave feminism, however, suggests that women *must* be independent. Post-feminism pressures women into believing the lie that their identity is found solely in the workplace, while completely eliminating homemaker as a suitable occupation. Post-feminism says, in effect, that women are valuable and can choose whichever vocation they want as long as that vocation is in the professional workplace and not in a kitchen. This standard limits the value of a woman who honestly desires

to be a stay-at-home-mother. It says that her passion for being a homemaker is less important than the pressure to have a career.

The second wave feminist movement got so caught up in creating independence that it did not consider how it would end up alienating the women who choose to be homemakers. Even though there are a significant number of women in the professional world, the choice to become a stay-at-home-mother has grown. Younger women are discovering that they do not want the hectic life that their mother had. Last year Baby Talk Magazine published an article titled “Meet the New At-Home-Mom”. In which Susan Shapiro Barash notes: "In my research, there seems to be a backlash among the millennial generation: in a sense, they're modeling themselves after their grandmothers, not their mothers" (Baby Talk 56). Young women are realizing that it is better to live simply than to make themselves sick with trying to juggle everything. The writer of the Baby Talk article goes on to say: “That doesn't mean today's stay-at-home-mother has abandoned her career aspirations or traded her BlackBerry for an ironing board, just that she's more concerned about living a balanced life than proving she's Superwoman” (Baby Talk 56).

Allowing women to become homemakers gives them the privilege of setting their own schedule, and most stay-at-home-mothers are also working at home (Baby Talk 57). Furthermore, the uniqueness of being a stay-at-home-mother helps women to be well-rounded (Baby Talk 58). Yet, even with the positives, homemakers are still feeling the brunt of feminist backlash. Homemakers are still feeling criticism for choosing a domestic vocation, instead of professional one. Post-feminism not only redefined success to the point that it compromised the value of stay-at-home-mothers; it also went so far as to compromise the true freedom and identity of women who are attempting to have it all.

Women also live in fear of not being the perfect mom, model wife, or having the perfect job. This fear of failing is what keeps so many women trapped in the feminist pressure cooker. Women think they have to meet all of the expectations that post-feminism has created, because they are fearful of the criticism that will follow if they do not give in to the pressure. During an interview with Dr. Ruth Lavender (Milligan College's resident self-proclaimed feminist) she made the statement "No matter which choice an individual makes, there is always someone criticizing. The key is for a woman to make her vocational choices for herself, based off of her needs and passions" (Dr. Lavender). Unfortunately, loudest critical voice is that of women condemning other women. Regardless of whether it is jealousy, or petty personality problems, women needlessly criticize each other. Women spend precious time tearing themselves down rather than pursuing their passions and empowering others to do the same.

Unfortunately, in American culture, it is acceptable to judge women by what they are doing "wrong" rather than by what they are doing right. If a woman wants to be a CEO, work part-time, or be a stay-at-home-mother she has to defend herself. Women should not have to constantly justify their life choices. It does not matter if a woman wants to stay at home, or if she wants to work, or if she wants complete independence. What matters is that she has been given the right to choose for herself and her choice should be respected. First wave feminism gave women equality, and the second wave of feminism granted women redefined independence, but third wave feminism need to become more apparent. Women are human, and are independent, and they have as much value as anyone else. There needs to be a shift in what determines the value of a woman. Women's value should no longer be ranked according to her position on the professional ladder. Whether she has a professional career or stays at home, she must be passionate about her vocational choice despite the opposition. Regardless of occupation, women

have value. Women do not have to have professional careers in order to be successful. Success can look like a tailored suit accompanied by a full briefcase, but success also looks like a devoted mother with an Early Childhood Education degree. All it takes to be successful is a willingness to work hard, no matter what the obstacles are, and respect should not be contingent upon a woman's vocation, but rather it should be extended based upon her perseverance.

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