The American mommy wars

Women, work and family

Alice Béja
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The debate in the United States over the place of women in the professional world has intensified lately, reopening the "mommy wars" of the 1980s that pitted housewives against working women. Time to question the focus on work and career, and reappraise the value of family life?

Fifty years ago, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, putting before the eyes of America the “problem that has no name”: the despair and alienation of housewives, prisoners in their own homes, condemned to take care of their husbands and children and to find their happiness in this confined life, with the help of the household products and machinery that consumer society showered them with. In the book, Friedan alternates between analysis of the history of feminist movements and masculine domination and interviews with housewives; *The Feminine Mystique* had a major influence on the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Betty Friedan was one of the leading activists of the period and one of the founders of NOW (National Organization for Women), a powerful organization defending women’s rights at the local and federal levels.

It was the world of the 1950s and early 1960s, where white heterosexual men smoking cigarettes and drinking whisky watched condescendingly – then fearfully – as women fought and struggled to escape the domestic sphere in which their bodies and their minds had been imprisoned. Has this world, which is revived today both ironically and a tad nostalgically by *Mad Men*, completely vanished? And why would one read Betty Friedan today, when women represent 47 per cent of the American workforce, and have managed to shrug off the yoke of domesticity and to step confidently into the male world of work?

Reading Hanna Rosin’s *End of Men*, one would think Friedan completely obsolete. For Rosin, women are very close to taking over the world: they do better than men at school, and will benefit from the end of blue-collar jobs and the rise of the service industry. [2] For Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s chief operating officer, women have to “lean in” [3] in order to make it in the workplace; they can succeed without giving up on having a family. The success of the few will benefit all; for Sandberg, the “trickle down” theory of wealth
is applicable to the cause of women. In fact, according to Kate Bolick, women should relish the independence they gain through work, and enjoy their lives without succumbing to the fetters of marriage and children. [4]

The debate about the place of women in the professional world has gained momentum in the United States mainstream media over the past two years, and has reignited the 1980s “mommy wars”, which, at the time, pitted housewives against working women, and were one of the legacy of the feminist movement led by Betty Friedan. Should women be more confident? Have they already won the struggle for professional emancipation? Or is it time to question the focus on work and career, and to reappraise the value of family life?

These issues are particularly sensitive in the United States, where women’s social protection largely depends on their employer. For a while, they were sidelined by the struggle for reproductive rights, especially the fight to defend women’s right to choose, Roe v. Wade being under threat in many states. The media’s focus in this debate on women who are white, rich and have high-profile jobs has had two consequences on the national conversation around women and feminism: on the one hand, it has revived the language of “responsibility”, the “when there’s a will there’s a way” logic which is also applied to the poor and the unemployed, on the principle that if they’re not making it, it means they don’t want it enough. In this perspective, individual initiative alone is the key to success and if women are to make it in the professional world, they should simply “lean in”. On the other hand however, there has been a reaction against this paternalistic approach to women’s place in society. Dissent published an issue on “the new feminism”, [5] that stressed social issues and the fact that women, far from “having it all”, [6] seldom have a choice between work and family; most of them have to work in order to be able to support their family. Job insecurity, the difficulty in organizing workers in healthcare, homecare, the food and beverage industry and so on, makes it hard for women – not only in America – to make their voices heard. Nancy Fraser, in her latest book, [7] goes even further: she criticizes the way in which feminism allied itself – often unconsciously – with neoliberalism by encouraging the employment of women “at all costs” and the flexibility of the job market, in order to make it easier for women to have a job and a family, and by obscuring economic and social issues behind identity politics.

Rather than painting the picture of a “war” between housewives and working women, rather than promoting a few women who have “made it” to give the illusion that their success is available to all, one should question the notion of “work” itself, and analyse its evolutions. While it is true that the model of professional life has long been a masculine one, resting on an unpaid female domestic workforce and allowing men to work without worrying about what happens at home, it does not necessarily mean that today’s job insecurity and the flexibility of the job market are “feminine”. To attribute the evolution of the job market to its feminization is to forget the economic and social evolutions of work in industrial countries over the past thirty or forty years. The growing importance of capital vs. labour, the fragmentation of jobs and careers, and the rise of finance cannot be said to have benefited women, who often have part-time, low paying jobs. Rereading The Feminine Mystique today is interesting not because of what it says about women’s right to have a job, but because it makes us think about the conditions upon which women have access to the job market. Which raises the question of work itself, and of its value. In times of crisis, when jobs are scarce, it is very dangerous to identify work with self-realization. Are we really nothing outside of our work, of our career? The race for
growth and productivity and the generalization of wage labour have made us think that work is what defines us and fulfils our purpose in life, and feminists, with good reason, have claimed the right for women to enter the professional world. But sanctifying work is risky, and might well bring about “societies of exhaustion”, where neither women nor men can find true satisfaction.

Footnotes


4. Kate Bolick, "All the Single Ladies", *The Atlantic*, September 2011

5. "The New Feminism", a special issue of *Dissent*, Winter 2013

6. See Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Why women still can't have it all", *The Atlantic*, (July/August 2012)


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