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Feminism and Women's Choices

1. As editor of this little journal [*The Women's Quarterly*] and a critic of feminism, I've often been accused of wanting to send women "back." Back to where is not usually spelled out. It's supposed to be obvious—back to split-levels and aprons, beehive hairdos and marriages to Ozzie Nelson. To question the impact of the past thirty years of social change upon women's lives is considered a provocative thing to do—at least if you're doing it from a non-feminist point of view. It's sort of like offering to make your husband a martini and fetch his slippers when he gets home from work. Or saying, "Actually I'd rather be at home with my kids than data processing." The first step on the slippery slope back to Fifties Hell.
2. Although feminism, as a conscious political movement, can boast fewer adherents today than the Czech communist party, its beliefs and assumptions about the way women should live their lives remain strong: We have absorbed the lesson that we should forgo—or postpone—marriage and children in order to forge* careers; when married, we should not depend upon our husbands, either to stay married to us for the long haul or to support us when we have children; we should not ultimately look to our families for satisfaction or happiness—those things are best realized in our jobs, and in our spiritual growth as individuals.
3. That this wisdom may be faulty is bitter medicine to have to swallow. So many of us imbibed these ideas and plotted our lives according to them that even as we're reeling* from their effect, grasping around for an antidote, we don't want to reject them. Yet reject them we must if we're to begin to solve the problems women face today.
4. For when you look around at modern women's lives, I think few of us would be able to say confidently that the progress we've made has resulted in net gain. Yes, we are freer than any generation of women in history to hold positions of power in the workplace and in government; but this has come at the expense of power over our personal lives. I've heard many accomplished modern women complain—without irony—that they don't have the "choices" their own mothers had. Some are college graduates who simply can't figure out how they're going to do it all—or even just one piece of it: find a decent man to marry, have children and a career, and yet also enjoy the sort of family life that was often absent in their own upbringing, as the products of divorced and/or working parents. Some are successful thirtyish vice-presidents of companies or partners in law firms who fret that they will never be able to meet a man or have children. Some are working mothers who feel they have no choice but to work, even while their children are

infants—just as a previous generation of women felt they had no choice but to stay home with their kids rather than work.

5. Women today feel they are obliged to work. Women before felt that they were obliged to stay home and take care of their kids. The problem that they really share is that they have no choice in both cases.
6. All of these women are bound together by the same problem: call it a new "problem with no name." And it's exactly the reverse of the old, 1950s problem with no name that Betty Friedan wrote about in her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*. In Friedan's time, the problem was that too many people failed to see that while women were women, they were also human, and they were being denied the ability to express and fulfill their potential outside the home. Today the problem is that while we recognize that women are human, we have blinded ourselves to the fact that we are also women. If we feel stunted and oppressed when denied the chance to realize our human potential, we suffer every bit as much when cut off from those aspects of life that are distinctly female—whether it's being a wife or raising children or making a home.
7. For if, as women, we were all to sit down and honestly attempt to figure out what sort of lives would make us happy, I suspect—assuming the basics like food and adequate income, and leaving aside fantasies of riches and celebrity—that most of our answers would be very similar to one another's, and quite different from men's.
8. They would go something like this: We want to marry husbands who will love and respect and stay with us; we want children; we want to be good mothers. At the same time, many of us will want to pursue interests outside of our families, interests that will vary from woman to woman, depending upon her ambition and talent. Some women will be content with work or involvements that can be squeezed in around their commitments at home; some women will want or need to work at a job, either full- or part-time. Other women may be more ambitious—they may want to be surgeons or executives, politicians or artists. For them the competing demands of family and work will always be difficult to resolve. But I think when we compare our conditions for happiness, most of our lists would share these essentials.
9. The women who don't desire these things—those who like living alone or who find perfectly fulfilling the companionship of their friends and cats or whose work eclipses their need for family—may be sincerely happy, but they should not be confused with the average woman.
10. The Roper Starch polling firm has asked American women every few years since 1974 about their preferences for marriage, children and career. The poll conducted in 1995 shows that the majority of women—55 percent—hope to combine all three, and a full quarter—26 percent—want marriage and children but not a career.
11. Unfortunately, for nearly thirty years, the public policies and individual ways of life that feminists have encouraged, and the laws they have pushed through, have

- been based on their adamant belief that women want more than equality with men or options outside their families; they want full independence from husbands and families.
12. And this is where ground zero of the debate is today. It's not about "going back"--as if that were even possible! Nor is it about whether women should have to make the Sophie's Choice decision of work versus children. It's about the best way to realize our aspirations--all of them. In order to do that, we have to begin by rejecting the ingrained feminist assumption that for most of us our happiness is something that can be achieved independently of men and family.
 13. The feminist wisdom so many of us received growing up--to delay marriage, to delay children, to put everything into our work--may help us achieve good jobs, but little else. It's harder to meet and attract men in your thirties than in your twenties; it's more difficult to start families later in life, not to mention extremely inconvenient to have to deal with a newborn in mid-career. It's also very tough, in the aftermath of the sexual revolution, to find men willing to marry and take on the responsibilities of family when there's a big supply of single women out there willing to sleep with them without demanding commitment in return.
 14. In my new book, *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us: Why Happiness Eludes the Modern Woman*, I propose that we do go back at least in one sense--to the idea of early marriage, and motherhood. Contrary to feminist wisdom, if a woman today marries in her early twenties and has children soon after, she is not condemning herself (if that is the word) to a life of domesticity like her grandmother. She is instead settling her personal life early, when it is easiest to do it, and freeing herself up for a career (if that's what she chooses), when her children are older and in school. And if enough of us are willing to do this, we also shut down the system of no-strings-attached sex that has so benefited men and injured women.
 15. Feminists will of course reject this idea, but that's because they insist on taking an androgynous* view of the sexes, in which the only way we can maintain women's equality is if we do precisely the same things and occupy precisely the same roles in life as men, whether it's changing diapers and taking out the garbage or fighting fires and going into combat. The moment a woman admits to wanting to be a wife, or to care for her children, she is seen as somehow letting down the side. But these desires persist, intensely. Perhaps that's why feminists have supported Bill Clinton so vehemently: Like him they believe that if a fact is denied, it ceases to exist.
 16. Feminists believe in the need for men and women to do the same things and assume the same roles in life. Since normally women change diapers, men become firefighters, and men work and provide for their families, for feminists, equality happens when men and women exchange occupations and share the same responsibilities.
 17. But as so many of my generation have found, while independence might be nice as a young single woman, it's not so nice as a single mother or as a single forty-year-old. And if we want to change our situation, we may not need to go back but

we may have to begin *looking* back, honestly, at some of the ideas we rejected in favor of the often hollow freedom we enjoy today.

GLOSSARY
Feminism: Women liberation movement.
Apron: A garment of cloth, leather, or plastic that is tied about the waist and worn to protect your clothing.
Beehive hairdo: Hairstyle that looks like a bee house. It was popular in the Fifties.
Forgo: give up
Forge: create
Reeling: spinning (moving) around
Androgynous: unisex