

The Role of Family In a Woman's Life

There is a lot of disagreement among feminists what role family plays in a woman's life. In a hypothetical scenario, if you were to ask different feminists their take on family, they will all probably provide you with different answers. Some, such as Shulamith Firestone and Betty Friedan will probably tell you about how family as an institution is one of the main reasons for why women's rights are held back. Others such as bell hooks and Chandra Mohanty talk about how family plays a vital role in a woman's support system. Then there are other feminists like Adrienne Rich and the Chicana women who don't support either side and present different arguments about family. Is there really a way to describe the complex relationship between family and feminism? And if there is, what is it?

Feminists on the "anti-family" side of this debate believe that the family unit as itself is inherently oppressing. Some believe that the stereotypical family, as presented by the Christian church, reinforces that a woman's place is in the home, caring for her husband and children. Shulamith Firestone brings up this point in her work, "The Women's Rights Movement In the U.S: A New View", stating, "Judaeo-Christianity has always espoused the inferiority of women, pointing to Genesis for proof of women's temptress nature, her special role, her mission to be fruitful and multiply and after Eden, to multiply the pain and submission to man" (Firestone 3). To Firestone, if a woman were to go against the stereotypical image that the Church promotes, such as by not having children, society would outcast her. Firestone discusses the hold that the Church has over the promoted image of what a family should look like is deeply rooted in

society. She claims that in order to have a really successful women's rights movement, women must attack the institution of family as a whole, because the Church's hold on society is preventing women from progressing² forward. Similar to Firestone's view of society-imposed stereotypes, Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, discusses how the institution of marriage, a major aspect of family, is a key factor of the "problem that has no name". She defines 'the problem that has no name' as a "sense of dissatisfaction"(Friedan 15) that suburban white housewives experienced in the 1950s-60s when they spent hours and days wondering whether they were experiencing the most out of their life. It is important to note that when Friedan wrote this book during the 1950s-1960s, society was reverting back to the suburban ideals. There was a decline in the amount of women going to college, and fewer women worked. Women were encouraged to become housewives, get married early and have several children. Friedan talks about this ideal of "the American suburban housewife" (Friedan 18) that society endlessly promotes. As she says, "Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers, their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands" (18). She also refers to how society conditions women to believe that they lead a fulfilling life, telling them how lucky they are that they don't have to work or worry about someone taking their job. Friedan, though not explicitly, blames the rigid structures and expectations of a woman's life on the institution of family. She emphasizes that society's imposing views of what a typical family should look like and who has what roles within it, is the reason for this "problem with no name". Women long to experience more out of their lives and the patriarchal society is frustrating their efforts.

Although Friedan and Firestone support their analysis with research studies and newspaper articles, they can only speak from the perspective of white women. bell hooks, in her

response to Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique", discusses how this is a problem for many white feminists, specifically in regards to the institution of family. As she says, "Like Friedan before them, white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group" ("Black Women" 1). hooks criticizes Friedan's argument by pointing out that she only represents one specific group of women in America: privileged, white, educated, suburban mothers and wives. She discusses how struggles that a white woman faces are much different than those of an African American woman. She addresses Friedan and other feminists like her to be more inclusive and look to advocate for the rights of all women in America regardless of race. In her work, "The Significance of the Feminist Movement", hooks describes how family is vital part of the life of a non-white woman. Acknowledging that sexism does exist in the institution of family as a whole, she says, "Despite sexism in the context of family, we (black women) may experience dignity, self-worth, and a humanization that is not experienced in the outside world wherein we confront all forms of oppression" ("The Significance" 37). hooks goes on to note that the feminist movement's attempt to devalue the importance of family and to in a sense "abolish" it is an example of the white feminist's perspective overshadowing that of a non-white feminist's. Feminist author Chandra Mohanty is similar to hooks. In her work, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse", she argues that when Western feminists group women all together, they ignore the specificities that make women different. As she says, "What is it about cultural Others(non-western people) that make it so easy to analytically formulate them into homogeneous groupings with little regard for historical specificities?" (Mohanty 340). She discusses how by over-generalizing, the issues about power are restricted to two groups. Those who have power (men) and those who don't have power

(women). These generalizations lead to misunderstandings and over-simplifications. She uses the simple example of women wearing veils in middle eastern culture to address this. She talks about how women in Iran and women in Saudi Arabia have different reasons for wearing their veils. But to generalize and to connect their veils to the oppression of women with regards to rape and sexual control is unfair because those who are writing this are not understanding the cultural significance of the veils. As she says:

Not only is it problematical to speak of a vision of women shared by Arab and Muslim societies without addressing the particular historical, material and ideological power structures that construct such images, but to speak of the patriarchal family or the tribal kinship structure as the origin of the socio-economic status of women is to again assume that women are sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the family (Mohanty 342).

Mohanty continues this example when discussing familial structures. She points out that when western feminists report on cultural traditions, especially regarding marriage, they usually portray the women in question as objects that are being traded without understanding its cultural significance.

The views on family and family are clearly not binary. There is truth in both sides of the debate and many other feminists acknowledge that. For example, among the writings of the Chicana women, “Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings”, many writers address the oppression that women face within the family. Enriqueta Longeaux Vasquez, in her work “The Woman of La Raza”, discusses how Chicana women are in a “the poor get poorer” situation. If their husbands are successful, they are expected to act a certain way and are dominated by their husbands. If their husbands aren’t “successful”, they are subjugated to abuse,

physical and or verbal, and if they divorce they are outcasted by society. If they do divorce, they struggle when finding a job and a house, single-handedly raising their children, and getting respect from society. But although Vasquez seems to lean towards the “anti-family” side in her work, she does address a significant point towards the end. She says, “The Mexican- American movement demands such that, with the liberation of La Raza, we must have total liberation. The woman must help liberate the man and the man must look upon this liberation with the woman at his side, not behind him, following, but alongside him, leading. The family must come up together.” (Vasquez 31). In this quote, one can see the similarities that Vasquez shares with feminists like hooks. Although she addresses how there is sexism within the familial structure like Friedan, she also addresses the importance of the family working together to help non-white peoples, specifically non-white women, to overcome society’s stereotypes, displaying her similarities to hooks. Vasquez’s take on the relationship between family and feminism shows its complexity.

Other feminists add to the debate of the importance of family within a woman’s life in different ways. In her work “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, Adrienne Rich adds to the discussion of feminism and family by forcing people to question what the typical family looks like. Her views on the idea of “compulsory heterosexuality” reinforce this idea. To Rich ,and many feminists in general, the bias of heterosexuality has been imposed on women for a long time. She describes it as an obligation that women must fill out in order to maintain a decent life and job. Her argument is that in order for a women to have a normal lifestyle they must live her life as a heterosexual woman, regardless of their sexuality. There is an inherent bias against women who identify as anything other than heterosexual. She argues that women are confined to the typical perception of “feminine” in which they must only love a man,

have children, do things surrounding the typical family structure and work a typical women job and follow the stereotypical lifestyle of a heterosexual woman (Rich 133). Rich's views can be seen side by side to those of Firestone, who similarly questions the Church's view on what a family should look like and challenges a woman's role within it.

It is quite clear that a woman's role in the familial structure can be interpreted in many different ways. There are several feminists, like Friedan and Firestone, who support the idea that the familial structure should be "abolished", there are several other feminists, such as hooks and Mohanty, who support the family's role in a woman's life and there are many, such as the Chicana women and Rich, who see the complexity of the relationship and think that the family's role within a woman's life should not be abolished or kept the way it is, but rather it should simply be altered. Although they may all disagree on the what kind of role family should play within a woman's life, it's obvious that all of them are advocating for women to be able to make their own choices, without the pressures and expectations of society. They would all like to live in a world where women can choose whether they want to be a mother or not, or choose whether they'd like to be married or not, rather than be forced into a role that society has propagated. The point of the arguments that Freidan and Firestone make seem to revolve around how women are simply not given any options. They are not given the option to choose whether they'd like to have children, its expected of them. They are not given the option to choose whether they'd like to get married, its expected of them. Feminists on the opposite side like hooks and Mohanty will no doubt agree on being given the option to choose whether women would like to have families or not. hooks and Mohanty's argument revolves around how Freidan and Firestone over-generalize and make it appear as though all women around the world advocate for no families. But they too would support a resolution that includes women choosing whether or not they'd like to be a

mother or a wife. Rich and the Chicana women would also agree on this. Rich would argue that when a woman can decide her own life choices without societal pressures, she would be able to break out of the system of compulsory heterosexuality and be able to get a decent job without conforming to what society's expectations are of femininity. The Chicana women would argue that with societal pressures out of the way, the expectations placed on women would disappear and they would be getting the same amount of attention and support that a man would get if he were to be in the same situation. It's having these options and being able to make those life decisions without societal pressure that all of these feminists agree on. The complexity of the relationship between feminism and family really does prevent one from coming up with one good answer. There are several answers and arguments that all have valid points and that speak from different perspectives. But it is clear that the discussion of the nature of this relationship between family and feminism should show up more in regular discourse.

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