

History of feminism in the 1990's

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



Overall, the rights and status of women have improved considerably in the last century; however, gender equality has recently been threatened within the last decade. Blatantly sexist laws and practices are slowly being eliminated while social perceptions of "women's roles" continue to stagnate and even degrade back to traditional ideals. It is these social perceptions that challenge the evolution of women as equal on all levels. In this study, I will argue that subtle and blatant sexism continues to exist throughout educational, economic, professional and legal arenas.

Women who carefully follow their expected roles may never recognize sexism as an oppressive force in their life. I find many parallels between women's experiences in the nineties with Betty Friedan's, in her essay: *The Way We Were - 1949*. She dealt with a society that expected women to fulfill certain roles. Those roles completely disregarded the needs of educated and motivated business women and scientific women. Actually, the subtle message that society gave was that the educated woman was actually selfish and evil.

I remember in particular the searing effect on me, who once intended to be a psychologist, of a story in *McCall's* in December 1949 called "A Weekend with Daddy." A little girl who lives a lonely life with her mother, divorced, an intellectual know-it-all psychologist, goes to the country to spend a weekend with her father and his new wife, who is wholesome, happy, and a good cook and gardener. And there is love and laughter and growing flowers and hot clams and a gourmet cheese omelet and square dancing, and she doesn't want to go home.

But, pitying her poor mother typing away all by herself in the lonesome apartment, she keeps her guilty secret that from now on she will be living for the moments when she can escape to that dream home in the country where they know " what life is all about. " (See Endnote #1) I have often consulted my grandparents about their experiences, and I find their historical perspective enlightening. My grandmother was pregnant with her third child in 1949. Her work experience included: interior design and modeling women's clothes for the Sears catalog.

I asked her to read the Friedan essay and let me know if she felt as moved as I was, and to share with me her experiences of sexism. Her immediate reaction was to point out that " Betty Friedan was a college educated woman and she had certain goals that never interested me. " My grandmother, though growing up during a time when women had few social rights, said she didn't experience oppressive sexism in her life. However, when she describes her life accomplishments, I feel she has spent most of her life fulfilling the expected roles of women instead of pursuing goals that were mostly reserved for men.

Unknowingly, her life was controlled by traditional, sexist values prevalent in her time and still prevalent in the nineties. Twenty-four years after the above article from McCall's magazine was written, the Supreme Court decided whether women should have a right to an abortion in *Roe v. Wade* (410 U. S. 113 (1973)). I believe the decision was made in favor of women's rights mostly because the court made a progressive decision to consider the

woman as a human who may be motivated by other things in life than just being a mother.

Justice Blackmun delivered the following opinion: Maternity, or additional offspring, may force upon the woman a distressful life and future.

Psychological harm may be imminent. Mental and physical health may be taxed by child care. There is also a distress, for all concerned, associated with the unwanted child, and there is the problem of bringing a child into a family already unable, psychologically and otherwise, to care for it. In other cases, as in this one, the additional difficulties and continuing stigma of unwed motherhood I feel the court decision of *Roe v.*

Wade would not have been made in 1949. Even in 1973, it was a progressive decision. The problem of abortion has existed for the entire history of this country (and beyond), but had never been addressed because discussing these issues was not socially acceptable. A culture of not discussing issues that have a profound impact on women is a culture that The right of abortion became a major issue. Before 1970, about a million abortions were done every year, of which only about ten thousand were legal.

Perhaps a third of the women having illegal abortions - mostly poor people - had to be hospitalized for complications. How many thousands died as a result of these illegal abortions no one really knows. But the illegalization of abortion clearly worked against the poor, for the rich could manage either to have their baby or to have their abortion under safe conditions. (See Endnote #3) A critic of the women's movement would quickly remind us that women

have a right to decline marriage and sex, and pursue their individual interests.

However, I would argue that the social pressure women must endure if they do not conform to their expected role is unfair. The problem goes beyond social conformity and crosses into government intervention (or lack thereof). The 1980's saw the pendulum swing against the women's movement. Violent acts against women who sought abortions became common and the government was unsympathetic to the victims. There are parallels between the Southern Black's civil rights movement and the women's movement: Blacks have long been accustomed to the white government being unsympathetic to violent acts against them.

During the civil rights movement, legal action seemed only to come when a white civil rights activist was killed. Women are facing similar disregard presently, and their movement is truly one. A national campaign by the National Organization of Women began on 2 March 1984, demanding that the US Justice Department investigate anti-abortion terrorism. On 1 August federal authorities finally agreed to begin to monitor the violence. However, Federal Bureau of Investigation director, William Webster, declared that he saw no evidence of "terrorism."

Only on 3 January 1985, in a pro-forma statement, did the President criticize the series of bombings as "violent anarchist acts" but he still refused to term them "terrorism." Reagan deferred to Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell's subsequent campaign to have fifteen million Americans wear "armbands" on 22 January 1985, "one for every legal abortion" since 1973. Falwell's anti-

abortion outburst epitomized Reaganism's orientation: " We can no longer passively and quietly wait for the Supreme Court to change their mind or for Congress to pass a law. " Extremism on the right was no vice, moderation no virtue.

Or, as Hitler explained in Mein Kamph, " The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence. " (See Endnote #4) This mentality continued on through 1989 during the Webster v. Reproductive Health Services (109 S. Ct. 3040 (1989)) case. The Reagan Administration had urged the Supreme Court to use this case as the basis for overturning Roe v. Wade. " (See Endnote #5) It is disturbing that the slow gains achieved by the women's movement are so volatile and endangered when conservative administrations gain a majority in government.

To put the problem into perspective: a woman's right to have an abortion in this country did not come until 1973. Less than two decades later, the president of the United States is pushing to take that right away. It seems blatant that society is bent on putting women in their places. From the above examples, it appears American culture prefers women as non-professional, non-intellectual, homemakers and mothers. This mentality is not easily resolved, because it is introduced at a young age. Alice Brooks experienced inequality on the basis of her race and her sex.

In her autobiography, *A Dream Deferred*, she recalls the reaction of her father when she brought up the idea of college to him: I found a scholarship for veterans' children and asked my father to sign and furnish proof that he was a veteran. He refused and told me that I was only going to get married and

have babies. I needed to stay home and help my mother with her kids. My brother needed college to support a family. Not only was I not going to get any help, I was also tagged as selfish because I wanted to. This is another example of women being labeled as selfish for wanting the same opportunities as men.

Alice Brooks is a very courageous woman; seemingly able to overcome any oppression she may encounter. During her presentation to our class, she said that "women who succeed in male dominated fields are never mediocre - they are extraordinary achievers." Her insight encapsulates much of the subtle sexism that exists today. I feel that no one can truly be equal in a society when only the "extraordinary achievers" are allowed to succeed out of their expected social role.

This attitude of rising blatant and subtle attacks on women's civil rights is further exemplified in recent reactions to affirmative action plans. These plans have been devised to try to give women and minorities an opportunity to participate in traditionally white male dominated areas. However, we see the same trends in legal action for the use of affirmative action plans as we saw in the 980's backlash against the Roe v. Wade decision. A few interesting points were presented in the case, Johnson v. Transportation Agency, Santa Clara (480 U. S. 616 (1987)). Mr.

Paul E. Johnson filed suit against the Santa Clara County Transportation Agency when he was denied a promotion, feeling the company's affirmative action plan denied him of his civil rights. Some interesting facts were presented in this case: Specifically, 9 of the 10 Para-Professionals and 110 of

the 145 Office and Clerical Workers were women. By contrast, women were only 2 of the 28 Officials and Administrators, 5 of the 58 Professionals, 12 of the 124 Technicians, none of the Skilled Crafts Workers, and 1 - who was Joyce - of the 110 Road Maintenance Workers.

The above statistics show women have been considerably underrepresented at the Santa Clara County Transportation Agency. These numbers are not uncommon and are found throughout business. It is interesting to note the current popular perception is that affirmative action precludes white males from finding employment with companies that implement these plans. The truth is in the numbers, however. The fact that Mr. Johnson felt he was denied his civil rights because an equally qualified woman was given a promotion, instead of him, is just a small window into the subtle sexism that exists today.

Most critics of affirmative action do not consider the grossly unequal numbers of men in management and professional positions. Secondly, it never seems an issue of debate that a woman may have had no other previous life opportunities in these male dominated areas. I do not intend to argue that affirmative action is good or bad, but only wish to point out that the current backlash against these programs is heavily rooted in sexism and racism. Often blatant violence or unfair acts against a group of people will cause that group to pull together and empower themselves against their oppressors.

The women's movement has made large steps to eliminate many of these blatantly sexist acts in the last century. Now the real difficulty is upon us:

subtle acts of sexism and the degrading social roles of women in today's conservative culture. Alice Brooks so eloquently described her experiences with inequality, stating, " the worse pain came from those little things people said or did to me. " As these " little things" accumulate in the experience of a young woman, she increasingly finds herself powerless in her relationships, employment, economics, and society in general.

The female child has as many goals as the male child, but statistically she is unable to realize these goals because of the obstacles that society sets in front of her. Society and media attempt to create an illusion that women have every right that men enjoy. However, women will never be equal until the day female scientists, intellectuals, professionals, military leaders, and politicians are just as accepted and encouraged to participate in all of society's arenas as males.