

Example of the impact of the womens liberation movement essay

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



While there is still quite a ways to go in the search for equal rights for women, society has still come a long way since the days of the bored, lethargic 1950s housewife. In the wake of *The Feminine Mystique*, the idea that women should be servile homemakers and focus on mothering children while men worked was proved to be an antiquated, regressive ideal that women should work towards. *The Feminine Mystique* proved itself to be one of the most important texts in women's liberation, being so influential in changing the way culture viewed women that the work itself has become somewhat passé and antiquated itself. In the wake of women's lib, Hillary Clinton and Beyonce, women as a gender have made great strides in society – at the same time, there is still a long way to go.

The feminist movement was, ostensibly, a reaction to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, indicating that women could work hard to achieve the same progress that African-Americans were able to achieve (Davidson & Lytle 342). Betsy Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, used scholarly and academic research, as well as interviews and other comprehensive methods, to publish a timely work on the state of women in the 1950s and 1960s. In this work, the “ layoffs, renewed age-discrimination, and segregation into female-only jobs” of many women after their hard work in World War II evidenced a uniquely male-dominated society that forced women into convenient roles that supported men without surpassing them (343). *The Feminine Mystique* shined a light on this social stratification and gender segregation in the workplace and household, allowing socially-conscious women to become aware of the inequalities that were being foisted upon them without them even knowing it. Mass media furthered

these ideas, argued Friedan, as the frivolous, emotional and marriage-occupied women found in magazines, films and television dominated popular culture (348). In this way, *The Feminine Mystique* was an incredibly important way to showcase the struggle of the suburban American woman. Even with the book's influence, there were (and are) some critics of Friedan's work. Some argue that the book provided an inaccurate depiction of all women as frustrated housewives, despite the many forward-thinking and career-minded women who had broken through in 1950s society. Other still believe that the book unfairly criticizes mothers and homemakers, making their individual choices and life preferences seem like the coercion of men rather than something they chose to do on their own (Schuessler, 2012). Despite the advances of Friedan's work and women's lib as a whole, there is still a lot to be desired about the state of women in America. While *The Feminine Mystique* provided women with the first inkling that something was wrong with the way they were being treated, this increasing work toward equality began to stall in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the rate of women joining the workforce started to plateau somewhat, and more and more pregnant and married women began to leave the workforce (Coontz, 2013). The answer for this change in trends is complicated; one could argue that it is evidence that society does not want women's rights to get too far advanced, and others argue that this is simply a case of women's desires becoming more equalized in terms of just how much they want to enter the workforce and so on. However, Coontz argues that " structural impediments prevent people from acting on their egalitarian values, forcing men and women into personal accommodations and rationalizations that do not

reflect their preferences,” showing that this equality ‘ wall’ is more a case of the former than the latter (2013).

The issues transcend gender equality as well; it is not so much of an issue of men keeping women from the gates of equal pay and equal responsibility; in fact, many men today seem to advocate for the idea that men and women should share the responsibilities of the household (Coontz, 2013). However, the complex intermix between work and family life makes it hard for couples to make everything fit into place; women, being given the biological responsibilities of carrying children, tend to be the ones who historically leave the workforce before fathers do (Coontz, 2013). This is exacerbated by the continued pay gap that women experience compared to men; when a couple gets pregnant, it therefore becomes more pragmatic that the man, who is paid more, remain at work while the woman is forced to drop out to take care of the child (Coontz, 2013). These situations create a complicated mix of personal and political prioritization of one’s life, our values stretching in order to behave pragmatically, no matter how idealized our society would like to be. In essence, while many more people agree in equal pay and equal work for women, the realities of life and the economy forbid us from actualizing these beliefs.

That being said, Friedan’s relative unimportance in a continuing sense for women’s rights does not discount her importance or that of *The Feminine Mystique* as a work: ““ *The Feminine Mystique*” is a fascinating mixture of antiquated attitudes (like that one) and others that have remained unchanged” (Maslin, 2013). Given the recent push back towards stay-at-home moms in the 21st century shows echoes of Friedan’s concerns about

gender oppression; given the aforementioned economic demands that force women to stay home regardless of their level of competence, confidence or acceptance by men, “ the feminist " revolution" that was supposed to profoundly reshape women's lives remains incomplete” (Warner, 2006).

Today, the need to assert that women don't deserve to be relegated to the kitchen or the bedroom is not as strong as it used to be; thanks to the women's liberation movement, most modern women are commonly accepted to have a place in the workforce and to have strong, independent lives of their own outside of marriage and childrearing. Since the women's lib movement led invariably to second-wave feminism, which fought militantly for women's rights (and won), the third-wave feminism of today has allowed for a more reconciled and moderate response to the inherent patriarchy of society now that women have achieved a relatively more comfortable part in it. Even mass media has advanced somewhat with an increasing number of strong female protagonists, though in other ways it has regressed, with the women's market saturated by sappy romantic comedies and pop love songs – “ Art is imitating life, turning women who seek equality into selfish narcissists and objects of rejection, rather than affection” (Dowd, 2005).

This advancement in perspectives has not been total, and some issues still remain, mostly with the men who are still used to the idea that they are in power. Socially, men still repel themselves from powerful women, choosing to marry or date weak-willed, younger women who are less likely to assert themselves against their man (Dowd, 2005). This desperate cling to societal control, even in men's dating choices, further discourages women from being assertive and chasing their aspirations, for fear they will be punished by

remaining alone (which is, in and of itself, a socially-constructed mandate for women to focus on romantic fulfillment). Furthermore, those who do not cling to patriarchal ideas of male control lament the ‘feminization’ of men, with the increasing acceptance of homosexuality and the rise of metrosexuality and men’s beauty being a source of (misplaced) anxiety for some men (Kulish, 2005). These attitudes tend to be held by upper-class men and Ivy League college students, old-money types whose bubbles have not yet been burst by the advent of women’s liberation even now.

How do we move forward from the remaining gender equality issues left to us after the women’s lib movement? Given the sociopolitical forces at work that serve to provide further barriers to “Our goal should be to develop work-life policies that enable people to put their gender values into practice” (Coontz, 2013). While *The Feminine Mystique* provided an important gateway for disenfranchised women to realize their ability to enter the workforce, creating a boom in women’s rights throughout the second half of the 20th century, the plateauing of women entering the workforce and the increasing demands of an economic recession have led to women and couples having to step back a bit in terms of their priorities. By having to go back to the home and become a mother and homemaker, women are both asserting their ability to choose this life and lamenting the economic circumstances that lead them to shy away from the workforce. Add to that the remnants of the chauvinist treatment of women by media and men alike, and there is still some work to be done to create a fully equitable, fair environment for women.

Works Cited

Coontz, Stephanie. "Why Gender Equality Stalled." New York Times. February 16, 2013.

Davidson, James West and Mark Hamilton Lytle. After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection. McGraw-Hill, 2000.

Dowd, Maureen. "Men Just Want Mommy." New York Times. January 13, 2005.

Kulish, Nicholas. "Editorial Observer: Changing the Rules for the Team Sport of Bread-Winning." New York Times. September 23, 2005.

Maslin, Janet. "Looking Back at a Domestic Cri de Couer." New York Times. February 18, 2013.

Schuessler, Jennifer. "Criticisms of Classic Abound." New York Times. February 18, 2013.

Warner, Judith. "The Parent Trap." New York Times. February 8, 2006.