

Prosperity Through Timeless Values

Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse • Your Coach for the Culture Wars



BRINGING HOME AND FRYING UP THE BACON: HOME V. WORK.

The Legacy and Future of Feminism Conference

Harvard University, April 11, 2008

Opening statement by Jennifer Roback Morse, Ph.D.

The subject of this panel is “Bringing Home and Frying up the Bacon: Home versus Work.” I am here to say that women have been poorly served by the way work and home balance has been framed. The trend of increasing educational attainment and labor force participation of married women began at the turn of the twentieth century, well before the modern feminist movement. The 1960-style feminism assigned a particular meaning to these trends and drove them into a very specific channel. In my view, this direction has been almost entirely destructive.

I will **first** establish that the labor force and educational trends were in place far earlier than is usually supposed. **Second**, I will describe what I believe are the most destructive aspects of the feminist interpretation of these trends. **Finally**, I will describe an alternative approach to the question of work and family balance. I believe the approach I suggest will be more humane for women, men and children.

Educational and Labor Force Trends

“Although the fact is not widely known, the ratio of male to female undergraduates in the United States was about at parity from 1900 through 1930.” This is the opening statement of Harvard Economics Professor Claudia Goldin’s 2006 paper on the subject of the gender college

gap. She goes on to note that male enrollments began to increase during the 1930’s and accelerated in the 1940’s as returning servicemen entered college on the GI Bill. The highpoint of gender imbalance in college enrollment occurred in 1947. “But starting then, ... female college enrollments have increased relative to male enrollments,” until now. Women undergraduates outnumber men on most campuses and in most disciplines. Note Goldin’s starting date for the shift: 1947, a full 15 years before the publication of **The Feminine Mystique**, and nearly two decades before the founding of the National Organization for Women in 1966.

The trend toward the increased labor force participation of married women also began well before the feminist movement. Labor force participation began to increase around the turn of the century, and accelerated in the 1940’s. Contrary to popular myth, not all the “Rosie the Riveters” were sent home the day after the armistice. A large percentage of women workers continued to work after the war. In fact, the acceleration in married women’s labor force participation was so strong in the 1940’s, that economic historians dispute not so much the timing of this shift, but its cause. Feminist ideology is not the primary cause.

The Destructive Influence of Feminism

A purely economic account of women’s labor force behavior would predict some, though not all, of the changes that have occurred in family life. An economist might argue this way: because women can now support themselves economically, they marry later, have fewer children, and are more prone to divorce. But this is only part of the story, in that we have choices about how to respond to the important social changes of women’s higher

education and careers. In the 1960's, a group of Marxist women who called themselves feminists defined the meaning of these social trends, and pushed them into a very distinct direction.

Marxism contributed two big ideas. The first is that the relationships between men and women are necessarily characterized by conflict, with the continual danger of dominance of men over women. The corollary is that men can't be trusted. An intelligent woman takes care of herself, financially and emotionally. And marriage is an institution that constrains and oppresses women. Anyone should be permitted to leave a marriage for any reason or no reason.

The second idea is that sex and gender are fundamentally political categories and not biological categories. Any observed differences between men and women are automatically suspect. If men and women are not equally represented in all fields of endeavor, the government must rectify the injustice. If women do more housework or childcare, this too, is prima facie evidence of oppression or unfairness. Feminism gives us women an inexhaustible supply of permission slips to nag our husbands. Feminism also tacitly tells us what kind of man to seek as a husband: a man who will do half the housework and not stand in the way of our career aspirations.

These two ideas of male dominance and gender as a political category have been entirely destructive. These ideas have generated regulation and litigation in the public sphere and suspicion and resentment in the private sphere. Women need not believe in either of them in order to pursue their educations or careers.

Both these ideas have Marxist origins. Frederick Engels, Marx's closest collaborator, equated the dominance of men over women with the dominance of capitalists over workers. He writes of an early, almost mythical period in which group marriage without concern for parentage, was the norm. According to Engels, the transition from group marriage to monogamy marked the beginning of the subordination of women. He

argues further that the economic and legal status of women is intimately connected to the organization of the household. I ask your indulgence for an extensive quotation from Engels. I'm not, as they say, making this up.

In the old communistic household, which comprised many couples and their children, the task entrusted to women of managing the household was as much a public, a socially necessary, industry as the procuring of food by the men. With the patriarchal family and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production.

Within the family, the husband is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat. ... The first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry. This in turn demands that the characteristic of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society be abolished.

So there you have it: For Marx, Engels and their followers, the relationship between men and women is a special case of class struggle. Sex and gender are fundamentally political categories, not biological categories. Marriage is as intrinsically oppressive and unjust as private property.

If you aren't convinced of the Marxist origins of these ideas, consider this: Betty Friedan, author of **The Feminine Mystique**, was not just a random disgruntled housewife. She had been a committed Leftist since her student days at Smith. She wrote for radical publications, including the journal of one of the most radicalized labor unions. Consider also how few feminists lament the decline of marriage as a social institution, in spite of the harms this trend has inflicted on women. Destabilizing marriage has been a consistent priority for the radical Left because they

consider monogamous marriage a central part of the capitalist system of oppression. Liberalizing divorce laws was one of the first actions of the Bolsheviks in Russia as early as 1917, and of the Socialist government in Spain as recently as 2005.

The Marxist ideology in the background also explains why so many feminist thinkers are so eager to dismiss evidence of biological sex differences. The Marxist analysis implies that differences between men and women are socially constructed, merely epiphenomenon. The modern mode of dismissing evidence of sex differences is to label them as “essentialist.”

And of course, throughout this entire discussion, one category of person is conspicuously absent: children. Viewing sex as a political category, rather than a biological category, distorts discussions of children beyond recognition. Throughout Engels’ tract, there is virtually no mention of children, beyond the dubious claim that they were once raised by all the adults within the group marriage. He does not even mention the biological differences between mothers and fathers, or the unique contributions each gender makes to child-rearing. The pregnant woman’s distinct vulnerability is not worth mentioning.

The issue of marriage and children are intimately related to the question of women’s work and wages. Economists have known for some time that the most significant source of the gender wage gap is marriage and children, not labor market discrimination per se. Never married women earn the same as never married men. Men earn more when they get married, particularly when they become fathers. Marriage and children are associated with declines in women’s earnings. Women tend to reduce their commitment to the labor force and focus on meeting their children’s needs in a personal way. By contrast, men tend to become more focused on their labor force performance with the arrival of children.

So by destabilizing marriage, feminists can kill multiple birds with a single stone. Mothers will

have to keep working even if they would prefer to stay home. They can’t risk interrupting their earning power if they aren’t sure their husbands will stay married to them. Women are likely to choose fewer children in a higher divorce risk environment. Both factors, taking less time out of the labor force and having fewer children, tend to reduce the earnings gap between men and women, even married men and women.

Many non-ideological Americans assume that closing the gender earnings gap is an unambiguous good. But equal incomes require identical behavior. Men and women behave significantly differently in the labor force, at home, and over the course of their lives.

In their desire to be equal with their male peers, women have forced their work lives into the mold created for male career paths. Traditional male career trajectories demand the most intense investment early in life, which happens to be the time that women’s bodies are most suited for pregnancy. By the time women have accomplished enough in their careers to feel financially prepared for motherhood, their peak fertility is behind them.

Parenthetically, men’s fertility may be compromised with age as well. There is suggestive new evidence that a child’s probability of genetic defects increases with the father’s age. The theory is that the DNA replicates less precisely as men age. This produces minor genetic defects that are not fatal to the infant. But these non-fatal defects are implicated in disorders such as schizophrenia, autism and cancer. Men 40 and older are nearly six times more likely to have offspring with autism than men under age 30.

Thus, even the seemingly innocuous goal of income equality has many costs associated with it. So let us put a human face on some of these costs.

The Human Costs of Feminism

The new mother who would like to stay home with her baby, but she is afraid that her husband might not stay married to her. When she drops her baby off at daycare, tears stream down both their faces.

The infertile career woman, and her close cousin, the single mother, not exactly by choice, but more by default. These women are extremely disappointed.

The reluctantly divorced: those millions of unseen men and women, whose marriages ended against their will. The law offers no protection to the blameless spouse who wants to stay married.

The despair of the divorced father, driven out of his home, now living in a Spartan apartment by himself, seeing his children perhaps every other week.

The jilted wife, whose husband abandons her for a younger woman.

The children who grow up shuttling between households, carrying their backpacks, hoping they actually have all their homework with them.

The father who flees with his children from an abusive woman. There are no spaces in shelters for him and his children. Some of these men stay with abusive wives in order to protect their children. No one believes these men and their children exist.

Fathers falsely accused of child abuse, as a strategic move in contested custody cases. There is, as far as I can tell, no penalty for making a false accusation.

The cohabiting woman who would like to get married, but who can't get her boyfriend to commit. Feminism taught her to believe that men and women are identical in their desires for sex, love, marriage and children. She can't figure out why she wants marriage and children so much more than he does.

The grief and loss, confusion and loneliness of all these people must count as a cost in any honest reckoning of the costs and benefits of feminism.

Humane Alternatives to Feminism

Up until now, women have defined our goal as being equal participants in a labor market designed for people who don't give birth. We

have made a devil's pact, under the influence of Marxism. We are allowed to participate in the public sphere, as long as we chemically neuter ourselves during our peak child-bearing years. When our children are the smallest and most vulnerable, we agree to place them in commercial care. That is, if we are lucky enough to have any children. If we are unable to conceive when we are finally ready professionally and financially, we agree to submit our bodies to the trauma of Artificial Reproductive Technology, including artificially over stimulating our ovaries.

The humane alternative to feminism is to let go of the demand for equal incomes, with its concomitant demand that all adults work full-time, all the time. I propose that we embrace our fertility. We would be better off if we accepted the reality that our fertility peaks during our twenties. We can go to college for a liberal, but not necessarily a vocational, education. Get married. Have kids. Let our husbands support us. Maybe go back to school for an advanced degree. Go to work. Help support the kids' college. And, since women live longer than men, we could be working longer and let our husbands relax a bit.

Of course, this vision of women moving in and out of the workplace with the changing needs of their families involves an alternative vision of marriage and gender. Marriage is a life-long institution for mutual cooperation and support, rather than the unenforceable non-contract it has become. We can view gender differences, not as necessary sources of conflict, but rather as opportunities for cooperation and complementarity. Our dignity as women does not depend on women being identical with men. Nor does our dignity depend upon being completely independent of men. We women can place our education and our talent at the service of our families and the community, rather than at the service of employers and our egos. Rather than squeezing our child-bearing around the periphery of our careers, we can integrate the natural cycles of our bodies into the core of our lives. I need not say that

cooperation between spouses would be far better for children. Nor need I say that this is the exact opposite of the Marxist vision, which replaced marital stability with employment stability.

In short, I claim the right to participate in the labor market as women, not as men in skirts. Up until now, we have insisted that women change their fertility in order to accommodate the labor market. I say we should take women's fertility as given and change the labor market to accommodate our bodies. I claim the right to get married and stay married, not the right to raise our children alone, and to spend larger and larger portions of our lives alone. Up until now, we have defined our personal goal as being completely financially independent of men. I say we should find ways to strengthen our collaboration with our husbands.

With this foundation of mutual cooperation, we can build a more humane world for women, for men, and for our children.

— *Jennifer Roback Morse is a senior research fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and the author of *Love and Economics: It Takes a Family to Raise a Village*, newly reissued in paperback.*