Leadership University *Reprint*

Reprinted from First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life • December 1992• Number 19

Despising Our Mothers, Despising Ourselves

Orania Papazoglou

> *Today's women are the victims of the second biggest con game in history. . . . The courts rip away our legal protection via "no–fault" divorce, nonexistent alimony, and joint custody. "Women's" magazines follow in the footsteps of Playboy and Hustler, degrading us to the level of unpaid prostitutes by glamorizing uncommitted sex. Employers are losing their commitment to providing our husbands with a living wage, reasoning that we, their wives, can always get a job to make up the slack. Cigarette and alcohol manufacturers gleefully haul in big bucks from the exploding new women's market, while our cancer and alcoholism rates skyrocket. Community colleges everywhere are scrambling to cash in on the huge wave of "displaced homemakers," meaning women who have been ditched by their husbands and are now forced to earn bread and rent money. All in the name of Liberation.*

The passage I have just quoted is the first paragraph of a book called *The Way Home*, by Mary Pride. It was published in 1985, making it, as far as I know, the first of a new genre: the post–feminist anti–feminist tract. Mrs. Pride was once enough of a feminist to have studied the work of Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Reuther in some depth. She is now an evangelical Protestant arguing passionately in favor of the proposition that a woman's place is submissive to her husband. Taken alone, she would be interesting chiefly for the sharpness of her mind, the humor of her prose–and the completeness of her conversion.

But Mary Pride cannot be taken alone. The past several years have been witness to a curious trend, a behind–the–scenes backward march almost never acknowledged in public. Every once in a while some woman who cannot be ignored will write a book whose message cannot be disguised–not only Maggie Gallagher's polemic *Eros and Civilization*, but also Alison Lurie's scathingly contemptuous anti–feminist novel, *The Truth About Lorin Jones*. Somewhat more frequently, a new–wave stay–at–home mother will be given space to vent her disaffection with the feminist ideal in *Newsweek* or *Time*. On the whole, however, the public perception has remained unchanged since the Carter administration: feminism is going to be triumphant because feminism is what women want. Armed with statistics, many of them specious, the National Organization for Women and its sisters have gone into the media fray to proclaim that We Cannot Turn Back the Clock and that The Legitimate Aspirations of Women wouldn't allow us to, anyway.

Just what those "legitimate aspirations" are, however, doesn't seem to be as clear–or as clearly feminist–as Molly Yard would like us to believe. Walk into any Waldenbooks and you will find them, filling up the self–help section and the new nonfiction racks, the fastest growing subgenre in the category of self–improvement: books on how to find a man, get him to marry you and stay married to you; books on decoding male speech and male expectations; books on how to become the kind of woman men really want. Never in the history of this country, not even in the domesticity–enraptured 1950s, have women been so obsessed with catching and keeping husbands. Never have they spent so much money, or tortured themselves so brutally, to satisfy the whims and caprices of men. After two decades of feminist gains in the workplace, the legislature, and the culture, every commonly recognized indicator points to the fact that the self–respect of American women is at an all–time low–and that their commitment to independence, autonomy, and self–justification is shrinking by the second. Cosmetic surgery is up, obsessive dieting is up, obsessive exercising is up. Sales of creams and lotions that claim they will prevent aging, sales of face powders and eye shadows that claim to be able to turn a plain face into Christie Brinkley's, sales of hair tints and nail polish and even eye–color–changing contact lenses are at an all–time high. Foot–torturing high heels are back in fashion. The chicest women's business suits are cleverly cut to look professional when a woman is standing still, but to flash a little leg when she walks. And in spite of all the statistics–on AIDS, rape, battering, and the rest–personals columns and singles bars are still doing a land–office business.

A further look through the stacks of nonfiction and self–help books is even more disconcerting. If titles and topics are anything to go by, once the woman of the 1990s has caught her man, her situation becomes not more, but less, secure. When Marabel Morgan published *The Total Woman* in

1973, the whole country laughed. Now books that are really nothing more than *The Total Woman* dressed up in respectably "psychological" language walk off the shelves at $19 to $22 a pop, and no one's laughing. As the manager of any chain store can tell you, these books sell primarily to "career woman types in suits." The fact that they frequently become hardcover best sellers tells you that they sell to a *lot* of career woman types in suits.

It is common feminist wisdom that the reason for all of this–the lack in women of the self–respect and sense of personal dignity to refuse to turn themselves into geishas–is, as Wendy Kaminer put it, "the intractability of sexual stereotypes and systemic discrimination." The problem with relying on this analysis, however, is that it won't wash historically. The New Woman of the nineties is a member of the first generation to have come of age during the American feminist dispensation. Unlike her mother and grandmother, she has been told almost from birth that her life can, and should, contain much more than marriage and a family. She is better and more expensively educated. She has a wider range of job opportunities and a better chance for promotion. She picks up legal, medical, business, scientific, and academic credentials at an unprecedented rate. Her access to birth control and abortion is absolute. There are a dozen organizations dedicated to fighting for her legal rights, defending her image as an independent and active human being, and supporting her through times of stress. She can do a thousand things her grandmother could not, from working as a bartender to getting a loan to start her own business. No, she does not live in a nonsexist society and no, she is not free as freedom has been envisaged by American feminists since Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. She is, however, freer. And if conventional feminist analysis is workable, she should also have more, not less, self–respect, and more, not less, independence of body and mind. The problem is, she doesn't.

To understand why she doesn't, we have to look at the fifties against which this wave of feminism was a reaction–or, perhaps more accurately, against which this wave of feminism was supposed to be a reaction. Our enduring myth of the fifties in America goes something like this: Once upon a time there was a great step forward for women, called the Second World War. During that time, the able young men of the country were drafted and sent to Europe to fight Hitler, leaving open their essential jobs in munitions factories and other vital services. When the government realized it had no spare men to fill these jobs, it decided to open them up to women instead, instituting subsidized programs for day care for their children and other workplace changes to make it easier for women to hold down men's jobs.

Then, when the war was over and the men were coming back, there was a great step backward. The jobs had been promised to the returning men. There was no place for the women any more. A great conspiracy was hatched, comprising not only government but the educational system, the arts, and even women's magazines, to force women to leave their work and retreat to their homes. The women resented this. Imprisoned in the suburban isolation of their postwar tract houses, they were bored and depressed and angry at being shut off from economic independence and self–affirming labor–market work. Still, the magazines and newspapers and television shows and movies kept putting out a stream of mind–numbing propaganda about the virtues of motherhood and the enviable state of the happy housewife. Society in general and men in particular valued the profession of wife and mother above all others for women. Women who were unhappy simply thought there was something wrong with them. Then Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, and when women read it they realized they'd been had. Energized by their anger, they abandoned their tract houses and moved purposefully and determinedly into the work force.

There are so many things wrong with this scenario one scarcely knows where to begin taking it apart. Yes, Rosie the Riveter was real–but she wasn't as large, vital, or competent a part of the American war economy as modern day feminists want to believe. And yes, the government was under a great deal of pressure to make good on its promise that the returning veterans would find their old jobs waiting for them–but it didn't have much opposition on that score. After all, the boys had just spent four years crawling through mud and getting shot at in a cause almost everyone in the country agreed was just. Nor were the Rosie the Riveters all that anxious to hold onto their jobs. Some of them were, but most of them knew something the National Organization for Women has never been able to understand. Most of the work done in this society, as in every society, is tedious, repetitive, tiring, and restrictive. The fact that it's also necessary doesn't help much.

It is important to remember that Friedan's analysis was directed at a particular kind of American woman in a particular kind of American place–to Smith girls in Westchester, not to high school graduates in Levittown. Friedan's neighbors may have been forced into motherhood by postwar propaganda, sidelined from intellectual pursuits by the cult of domesticity, but the Levittown mothers were not. Many of them were good Catholics in an era when being a good Catholic meant not only having, but wanting, a large family. The difference in the postwar era was that they could afford to bring these families up in relative safety and comfort.

They also had the support of both their government and their Church. They were secure, because the divorce laws in most states were still strict and divorce was therefore both expensive and uncommon. They were mostly unhampered by taxation. It is fashionable these days to say that the Carter and Reagan years were the death of the middle class, especially the lower middle class. Inflation, anti–union initiatives, and the sickly state of the manufacturing sector are supposed to have made the Levittown life a financial impossibility. But the median family income today, in constant dollars, is actually higher than it was in the fifties. It is higher even if the income of wives is excluded, and it has more than kept pace with inflation.

What hasn't kept pace with inflation is the dependent tax deduction, an oversight–deliberate or otherwise–in federal family policy the grievous effects of which have been compounded by the skyrocketing rates at which most people are expected to contribute to the Social Security system. At times during the postwar years, the top tax bracket in the United States reached 91 percent. It is now down to 33 percent, yet the middle–class family of four pays four times as many dollars in income taxes as it did in 1954. It pays 200 times as much in Social Security contributions. If the dependent tax deduction had been kept level with inflation, it would now stand at $6,684 per year per dependent child or stay–at–home wife. A family with a husband's median income of $28,250, a full time homemaker wife, and two children would pay no federal income tax at all. At 1954 rates, it would pay less than $425 in Social Security contributions, instead of (as now) more than $2,100. We used to tax the single and childless to insure good lives for our children. We now tax our children to insure good lives for the single and childless.

In housing, it was much the same. Except in a few pockets of extravagant affluence, like the Gold Coast of Connecticut and the more expensive suburbs of New York and Chicago, town zoning boards and administrative councils went out of their way to be hospitable to developers who promised to produce affordable housing in sufficient quantity to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of new families that were formed at the end of the war. Levittown and its counterparts came into existence not because of the greed of developers or the catatonia of town planning officials but because they solved an urgent problem: where to put all those people, and especially all those children. Now towns with as little claim to distinction as the small one in which I live routinely zone for exclusiveness. Building lots must be two acres or over, new houses must be 2,500 square feet or over–even roof pitch, color, and the number of bedrooms and baths are set in advance, all in the name of "preserving the character of the town" and making housing expensive. We used to swallow our aesthetic prejudices and our fear of change to insure that parents of children could afford to raise those children in decent places. Now we force children to grow up on the back streets of dangerous and decaying cities to insure that our aesthetic sensibilities are not offended, our fear of change is never activated, and our equity will keep rising by at least 10 percent a year.

The Church, too, played its part. She asked her members to accept large families as gifts from God, and then worked hard to make those gifts more affordable. Teaching sisters staffed the parish schools, charging little for their services and making it possible for a full third of the parishes in this country to offer a parochial school education to the children of their parishioners free of charge. Now that same parochial school education costs between $750 and $1,250 per child per year. Nursing sisters staffed the Catholic hospitals, also charging little for their services, making it possible for medical care to be offered to the indigent or near–indigent–or even to children in families that were a little hard up that month–at nominal or nonexistent fees. Now Catholic hospitals charge as much as secular ones and can be just as intransigent about refusing care to the uninsured.

In this, at any rate, the feminist analysis of the fifties zeitgeist is correct. We did value families in the fifties, especially families with children. We knew it was difficult and sometimes expensive to raise them, but we thought they were worth the sacrifices we had to make. Their welfare was more important than ours. To blame the plight of children today on lack of government–sponsored social services or cutbacks in Medicaid funding or a retreat from the commitment to the welfare state is naive and self–serving. The welfare state was much smaller in 1954, and Medicaid didn't exist. Most children were still far better off than most children are today. The plight of today's children can be blamed on one thing and one thing alone: we no longer care what happens to them.

To understand how we got to here from there, it is necessary to explode another small segment of the myth of fifties America: the idea that it was a time when society in general and men in particular *valued* women in their roles as wives and mothers. The fifties may have been entranced with children, but it certainly was not entranced with wives and mothers, and it wasn't nearly as enraptured by marriage as we want to think. On the surface, it was the Decade of Togetherness. Underneath, it was the Decade of Divorce Reform.

At the end of the Second World War, fully forty states out of the then forty–eight refused to grant civil divorces on any grounds but adultery or desertion. Of the other eight, only Nevada allowed divorce for "irreconcilable differences." Almost all states made divorce as difficult and expensive as possible. Alimony awards were high and likely to last until the remarriage or death of the wife. Community property laws in some states gave a wife half of everything her husband owned at the time of the divorce and often half of everything he made thereafter, again until her remarriage or death. Most states mandated that, in addition to her alimony, a wife was entitled to her house and the custody of their children unless her husband could prove her to be grossly negligent or morally corrupt–not an easy thing to do in those days of few social workers, little social work ethic, and an assumption of the absolute right of people to privacy in their own homes. Government made divorce a bad deal for a man financially, and the rest of society made it a bad deal in every other way. Country clubs refused to accept divorced people as members or to retain them in membership. Businesses looked on divorced men with suspicion and slowed their rates of promotion–or simply refused to hire them in the first place. The Catholic Church's position on divorce was uncomplicated, uncluttered, and unbreachable: divorced and remarried Catholics were living in sin and unable to approach the sacraments. Annulments were seldom granted and even then only on limited grounds and only after elaborate investigations by skeptical clerics who wanted substantive proof of a contravention of the conditions necessary for a valid marriage. Psychological unfitness was rarely allowed as grounds unless one spouse or the other was a full–blown schizophrenic at the time of the wedding. If there was one thing these women did not have to worry about, it was that they were going to be traded in on a newer model.

In the fifties, all this began to change, slowly at first, but inexorably. The fact is, a great many American men of the fifties, especially middle–class American men, didn't like domesticity all that much, didn't like women all that much, and especially didn't like wives and mothers. If there is a coherent explanation for the drastic change in the divorce laws between 1960 and the present–a change so drastic that a wife may now be divorced not only without her consent, but, in some states, without her knowledge–it is found in the real, rather than the remembered, culture of the fifties. During the period we now think of as drunk on home and hearth, the American public was increasingly treated to images of Woman as Vampire. There was Momism–the image of Mother as a psychological devourer intent upon emasculating her husband and her sons. There was Bob Norman's "Miss Golddigger of 1953"–describing marriage as a racket in which women used sex to snare, trap, discard, and then bleed the idealistic young male. "Trapped," in fact, was the word American men most commonly used to describe their lives in the fifties. It surfaced in every poll, every survey, and every men's magazine right through the so–called decade of domesticity. Nor was it confined to adult men talking among themselves. Anyone who grew up in the years before 1968 can remember the endless harping in schools and homes, visited on daughters as well as sons, to "finish your education" and "not get trapped into marriage too soon." For men and women going on to elite colleges and universities, this propaganda was especially strong and especially unrelenting. "Marriage can ruin a man," our professors, mostly male and to an unusual degree either single or divorced, insistently told us. It isn't surprising that, as the decade drew to a close, even most women were beginning to think of marriage as "bad" for men and women as a species of rodent whose purpose in life was to suck the blood out of the male. Feminists say women were force–fed a self–image of stupidity and passivity in the fifties. I say we were force–fed a self–image of rapaciousness, viciousness, and social uselessness.

Still, as long as their marriages were stable, most women–Betty Friedan notwithstanding–were content to stay in them. For all the bad press women were getting, they had been left one socially useful function, and the most important one: the bearing and raising of children. Even without Dr. Spock and Berry Brazelton warning of the dangers of day care, most mothers felt their children belonged at home until they were ready to start school, and needed someone to be at home once school was over. Love, food, shelter, and a stable environment–that was what children needed. If being considered a cross between Dracula and a puppet was what you had to pay to get it for them, you paid it.

It is important to remember that the great modern phenomenon, the explosion of women into the workforce, is composed of two parts: young women graduating from college after years of being told that marriage is a "trap," and displaced homemakers forced out of their homes by "modern" divorce laws and "modern" financial settlements. The American housewife of the fifties didn't burst the bonds of her domesticity and escape into the unfettered world of the labor market shouting paeans to her strength and independence. She was dumped there, usually by a husband in search of younger women, fewer responsibilities, and uncommitted sex.

In the middle of all this, the Friedan book did offer some significant insights and complaints. America didn't value its women as much as it wanted them to think it did, and the changing divorce laws were making the position of wives and mothers more precarious by the year. Women deserved a better deal and a better press. On none of these points would there be an argument with her. The problem wasn't in Friedan's descriptions of suburban life–although they were applicable to far fewer women than she thought they were–but in what she decided had to be done about them. Millions of women now revere Betty Friedan as the woman who first rebelled at male domination and devaluation of women, but rebel was exactly what she didn't do. Not only did *The Feminine Mystique* not challenge the American male's negative picture of the nature of women, it *ratified* it.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which Friedan held the American woman in contempt. No male supremacist in the country could have outdone her. Housewives were being portrayed as empty–headed nitwits in frilly aprons causing nonsensical panic to their husbands and sons? Well, according to Friedan, the entire occupation of American wife and mother consisted of "tasks for feeble–minded girls and eight–year–olds." The American mother was really a vampire, devouring her husband and sons? According to Friedan, "we have gone on too long blaming or pitying the mothers who devour their children, who sow the seeds of progressive dehumanization, because they have never grown to full humanity themselves." Marriage suburb–style was no better than legalized gold digging? To Friedan, in a supposed "insight" that would permeate the American women's rights movement forever after, it was no better than prostitution.

From beginning to end, *The Feminine Mystique* was an unrelenting attack on women's work–on homemaking, motherhood, teaching, nursing, secretarial work, and all the rest. At no point did Friedan challenge the predominant male assumption that any work women engaged in must be intellectually unsatisfying, professionally unrigorous, and socially marginal. In fact, she went out of her way to confirm it. She turned her biggest guns on what would later be called "the secret life of the American wife," claiming it to be exactly what men had always thought it was, except less joyful. "It is urgent," she said, "to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non–existence, nothingness in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or 'I' without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive. For women of ability, in America today, I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous."

Betty Friedan came to be seen as a champion of women not because she defended them, but because, contrary to the prevailing wisdom of her day, she insisted on nurture rather than nature as the cause of their inferiority. If American women were passive, trivial, rapacious, and smug, it wasn't because of hormones, as the natural scientists thought, or psychosexual inevitability, as the ascendant Freudians thought, but simply because they'd been brought up that way. If they were brought up differently, they would be different–more like men. If they put their minds to it, got out of their houses and got themselves sensible jobs, they could make themselves different, right away. An independent career outside the home was the psychic wonder drug that would abolish manic depression, compulsive overeating, and the housemaid's knee, all in a single dose.

II

Betty Friedan addressed *The Feminine Mystique* to other women like herself, to upper–middle–class women with degrees from Seven Sisters colleges who were now "stuck" in suburbia. Some of these women even listened to her and took her to heart–although, again, probably fewer of them than anyone wanted to believe. Friedan did, however, have a natural audience–not my mother, but me. Like most middle–class young women coming of age in the baby–boom generation, I had been fed for years on admonitions to "finish my education," "not get married too young," "not get tied down too early." The official line was that marriage and motherhood were wonderful things, the greatest fulfillment in the world–but that official line was delivered with all the sincerity of a KGB officer pontificating on the wonders of due process. Like Mary Pride, I spent most of my late childhood and early adolescence fascinated by a monthly column in one of the largest and most prestigious of women's magazines, a column called "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" The subtext was not reassuring. By the time I was ten years old, I had figured out that being "just a housewife" got you no respect.

The women of my generation would have benefited from a defense of women, but we didn't get one. What we did get was the promise that we didn't have to be anything like those terrifying second–class, tenth–rate people, our mothers. If my high school graduating class had been honest when they answered that question about "goals and ambitions" for the yearbook, they would have left out all the nonsense about becoming computer programmers and doctors and artists and just put, one after another, "to be nothing at all like my mother."

From the beginning, this new wave of American feminism has been a revolt not against men, but against mothers, with devastating consequences. The force of this revolt nearly wrecked the movement at its beginnings. Headline–grabbing radical reactionaries like the Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM) and the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH) did nothing to reassure the American public that baby–boom women were ready to run General Motors or get elected to the White House. The emergence of "political lesbians"–women who were not actually lesbians, but decided to become lesbians in order to "assert their feminism"–confused the rest of us more than they actually managed to assert anything. Shulamith Firestone's and Redstockings' demands for "reproductive technology" that would free *everyone* from pregnancy were not only bizarre, but more than a little repugnant. This was not what most of us were looking for. We were much more comfortable with the National Organization for Women. If it seemed to be having its own troubles with principles of organization and a radical wing close to out of control, at least it affirmed our desire for "real" careers and gave us an excuse to drop out of our consciousness–raising groups, which by then were mainly raising our consciousnesses about how annoying it was to have to spend a lot of forced faked intimate time with women we didn't really like very much.

And yet, mainstream feminism had more in common with the radical kind than we were willing to admit. Both wings of the movement took the position that marriage was death–the mainstream just put it more politely. *They* had Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation*. *We* had Kathrin Perutz's *Marriage Is Hell*, although with reservations. On motherhood, we were equally negative and equally doctrinaire. The radicals wanted to breed in test tubes, according to the prescriptions offered in Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. We didn't want to breed at all, as per Ellen Peck's *The Baby Trap*. To a woman, we agreed with Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate* that "women with families [were] inclined to small–mindedness, petty jealousy, irrational emotionality and random violence, dependence, competitive selfishness and possessiveness, passivity, a lack of vision and conservatism." So spoke the feminism we had embraced and claimed as our liberation–a feminism deemed "feminist" by virtue of its hatred of women.

What is so frustrating, looking back on all this, is how unnecessary and destructive it all was. American women in the fifties needed feminism, real feminism, feminism that would embrace both its career women and its career mothers. Bright women who honestly wanted and needed to work in the professions were being foiled at every turn. Heroic women who had dedicated their lives to the welfare and education of children–as mothers, teachers, nurses, social workers–were being systematically marginalized and devalued, made to feel stupid and second rate because they had taken seriously the Judeo–Christian precept that it was better to do for others than for oneself. A real feminism would have affirmed them both, searched for ways to allow each to be more secure and more valued in what she had chosen to do. Instead, the false feminism we got declared war on mothers.

"Declaring war" may sound like hyperbole. I don't think it is, and I don't think the war is over, either. According to Shulamith Firestone, pregnancy is "the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species." According to one of the women in Ann Dally's *Inventing Motherhood*, raising an infant is "spending all day, every day, in the company of an incontinent mental defective." According to Betty Friedan, the women of *The Feminine Mystique* had "a sad, sick love affair with their own children."

Before we could really go to war against mothers, though, we had to go to war against wives, and we did. In one state after another, local chapters of the National Organization for Women went to bat for no–fault divorce laws, "equitable" divisions of property, and co–custody provisions. A hundred years after the first wave of American feminists had won the right of divorcing mothers to their children, American wives were once again faced with the threat of losing them in divorce actions–a threat that could be, and was, used by abusive husbands to keep battered wives in their marriages. By 1987, a woman could be divorced without her consent in forty–five states. "Equitable" division of property hasn't been a magic charm for women, either. It almost always went along with the abolition of alimony, which the mainstream women's movement found demeaning in any case. Instead, women are awarded "maintenance" for a few years–usually two to five–until they can "train for the job market" and "get on their feet." Exactly what the average displaced homemaker–described by Sylvia Ann Hewlett in *A Lesser Life* as a woman who is "fifty–two years old and who has invested two to three decades in her home and family"–is supposed to train for that will give her anything like a living wage, nobody knows. And yet, as Hewlett reports, by the mid–seventies in the state of California "only 15 to 17 percent of divorce cases . . . involved alimony payments . . . to the ex–wife; the amount of money involved in these payments was modest (median award $209 a month); and in only a third of these cases was the alimony award open–ended (until death or remarriage). Indeed, two–thirds of the awards had a median duration of less than three years."

It's no wonder that these days a husband's income rises 42 percent in the wake of a divorce, while that of his wife and children falls by 73 percent.

The colossal indifference of the mainstream feminist organizations throughout the seventies to the misery caused by all this liberation is staggering. I once asked a woman I knew, head of what was then called the New York Legal Caucus and an ardent campaigner for no–fault divorce in New York State, how all this could possibly be "good for women." "It's good for women," she told me, "because it discourages dependence. As long as women can take the easy way out and just get married, they will, and as long as they do, we'll never have real equality."

What this woman was saying, of course, was that *she* would never feel comfortable about her own pursuit of equality as long as even a minority of the women in the country were not pursuing it her way. What she was saying was that it was worth any amount of other people's pain to establish her personal vision of a brave new world.

In public, of course, women's rights organizations never admitted that "if women can take the easy way out and just get married, they will." Official feminist strategy was to pretend that every woman in America wanted to get out of the "confines" of her home and hit the workplace. And if she didn't–she should. Being a full time wife and mother was suffocating her, whether she realized it or not. All this pain and suffering was for her own good.

About this time, women's rights organizations began to use a number of tactics to reinforce their position, to turn their mythological vision of American women into the next best thing to fact–namely, into what politicians would think of as fact. Chief among these was a statistic, put out by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that said, "56 percent of all women with children under six are in the labor force."

It was a lovely statistic, made lovelier by the fact that its particulars were buried in a report an inch and a half thick that no one was ever likely to read. Women's organizations presented this statistic as if it actually said what it seemed to say–that the majority of women with children under six were now striding out every morning to a nine–to–five job.

Anyone who bothered to look up the details, however, got a different picture. For one thing, the Bureau of Labor Statistics defined being "in the labor force" as working for pay as little as one hour a week. Counted also as being "in the labor force" were women who worked at home and in family businesses, like small stores and restaurants, where they could bring their children with them. Then there were the "seasonals"–women who picked up extra money at Christmas or during the harvest season, but didn't work at all during the rest of the year. Of married women living with their husbands and having children under the age of six, only 35.6 percent are employed full–time. Of married women living with their husbands and having children under three, only 33.7 percent are working full time. Among them are numbered many women like me, who work at home and see their children as often and as regularly as any full–time mother.

This false image of women in the work force was bad enough as it stood, but the mainstream feminist organizations made it worse by propagating the view that even though most women worked because they "had" to, they also worked because they "wanted" to. Having swallowed the definition of full–time motherhood as confining, suffocating, and unrewarding, they assumed that every other woman had swallowed it, too–or ought to have. At any rate, the women who hadn't accepted this view didn't count. They were Barbie dolls, unglamorous, unempowered, unthreatening. We could forget all about them.

This misrepresentation of women's lives and devaluation of any dissenting opinion, coupled with a straightforward plea to American ideals of fairness and political equality, seemed to be working beautifully. Between October of 1971 and March of 1972, the women's movement had managed to do something the first wave of American feminism had failed to do after fifty years of effort–get an Equal Rights Amendment through the United States Congress. The House of Representatives passed it by a vote of 354 to 23. The Senate passed it 84 to 8. A year later, thirty states had ratified the amendment and there were only eight more to go.

Maybe the National Organization for Women and all its sister organizations had begun to believe their own publicity. Maybe they had forgotten that it was image they were orchestrating, not facts they were presenting, when they drew their media picture of a feminist America. Whatever the reason, between 1973 and 1979, they got the shock of their lives. It was bad enough that the ERA was not ratified. They had every reason to think it would be. They had played the male political game as well as it could be played, they had worked themselves into exhaustion, they had a right to expect their reward–success.

What made the defeat of the ERA really awful was that it was defeated by women.

III

I have never met Phyllis Schlafly. I have never heard her speak. I have seen her publication once or twice, and it seemed to me to be crudely put together and intellectually unsubtle. The woman fascinates me nonetheless. At one point in the STOP ERA campaign, it was said that she could get a thousand protesters to the steps of any state capital anywhere in the country in under an hour, and ten thousand letters into the mailbox of any Washington official in three days. Whatever Phyllis Schlafly is, she isn't what the organized women's movement portrayed her to be all through the days of the fight for ERA. She is not a Barbie doll, a fool, a frump, or an idiot. She has a genius for political organization, and she isn't "passive" about using it.

The feminist movement found STOP ERA frightening not because they took it seriously–at least not in the beginning–but because everything they believed in said it was impossible. Rumors floated through feminist circles that Schlafly was a front for her husband, or organized business interests, or Ronald Reagan, or conservative politicians, or the CIA–at any rate, for some man. Other rumors floated about secret funding from rich industrialist and right–wing terrorist organizations and fundamentalist churches. To the end, feminists refused to accept that they were seeing what they were seeing–a traditional housewife fighting to be allowed to remain a traditional housewife, backed up by tens of thousands of other traditional housewives with the same thing on their minds. Schlafly ran STOP ERA out of her own home, with no paid staff. She was opposed by Presidents and movie stars with plenty of money to throw around and easy access to the national media. She won anyway.

It really shouldn't have come as such a shock. American feminism had been hacking away at the already low status of traditional wives and mothers since *The Feminine Mystique*. It hadn't made any allies in that quarter. Its support of no–fault divorce, joint custody, and "equitable" division of property had weakened the financial security of the women who took motherhood seriously and wanted to practice it full time. To these women, feminists looked like the allies of wayward husbands, not women. What Phyllis Schlafly did was to convince them of something they already believed, but may not have been able to put into words: *without* the ERA, it was possible that they would someday retrieve the rights of women in marriage, if not for themselves at least for their daughters. With the ERA, that would be impossible.

There were a lot of other issues, of course, hot–button issues for liberals and conservatives–the ERA would mandate the drafting of women and sending them into combat; the ERA would amount to a constitutional amendment in favor of abortion on demand; the ERA would end social welfare programs that did not apply as equally to men as to women, like Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The laundry list went on and on, but the core of it was always this: traditional women saw feminists as the enemy of what they valued most, motherhood.

NOW and its sister organizations had spent so much time talking about the family as a prison, children as a trap, and birth control and abortion as the only way a woman could really be "free" to do "serious work," they'd failed to notice something: as the baby–boom women began to age, they also began to marry and to have children, and once they had children they began to change their minds about a lot of things.

Chief among the things new mothers changed their minds about was the relative importance of work and family. Single and childless women consistently put career first. Mothers almost invariably put family first–the most striking thing about *The Motherhood Report*, a mostly anecdotal collection of women's views on motherhood whose authors try desperately to affirm the feminist myth in the face of interviews that contravene it at every turn, is how many of the working mothers of young children long to quit and stay home with the children. Some are prevented by finances, others by their fear that the feminists will turn out to be right and motherhood will be a trap, others by fear of the future–with the unstable state of marriage, what will they do if their husbands leave? Almost all these mothers, working or not, resent the feminist movement heartily for putting them in a bind.

They aren't the only ones. As the 1980s got under way in earnest, there began to be some unpleasant rumblings from those bastions of feminist recruitment, the colleges and universities. The news wasn't all bad. In 1990, the graduating class of Wellesley college could object to the presence of Barbara Bush as a commencement speaker because she'd spent her life "seeking her identity through her husband." Still, the news wasn't all good, either. Reporters sent to campuses to interview the new crop of women came back with too many of the wrong quotes. "I'd never be a feminist," a young woman told the *New York Times*. "My mother was a feminist. She was never home. I'm going to be home for my children." "You can't say you're a feminist on this campus," another said, "because then everybody assumes you're a lesbian. I mean, most of the feminists are." And the cruelest blow of all, from a young woman climbing the corporate ladder at a large publishing house, the new–age beneficiary of a decade of feminist agitation in the work place, "The way I see it is, feminists are bitter, angry women who end up alone."

Finally, and most painfully, there were the rumblings from the women who had once been allies, the brave new career women of the sixties generation. Some of them were furious. After all, they'd been told they could have it all–and they couldn't. Feminism had lied to them.

Thus it was that in the wake of the defeat of the ERA and the growth of the prolife movement, many feminist organizations, especially the National Organization for Women, woke up to "family issues." I would like to say that was a hopeful sign. The Lord only knows, we need some constructive thinking about family issues.

All indications, however, are that nothing much has changed, except the rhetoric. Not a single one of the major mainstream feminist organizations is willing to consider marriage and motherhood as anything but a problem. Not one of them is interested in helping women who want to make that choice pursue it in dignity. Everyone wants to make that choice a near or total impossibility. Being "just a housewife" still gets you no respect, especially from feminists.

NOW has changed its thinking on no–fault divorce–probably because it was an issue they either had to change their minds on or be killed by–but it hasn't about its opposition to making it "comfortable to stay home," as one woman working to "reform" the dependent widow's pension out of the Social Security system put it. In fact, their policy has been to resist anything and everything that might make it possible for women to stay home. NOW, the Women's Research and Education Institute, the Women's Equity Action League, and the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues have all supported child–care initiatives intended to fund full–day care centers with public money, but opposed voucher systems that would allow women to choose to use that money to pay for day care or to bridge the financial gap that may force them into a work force they don't want to enter. For a movement dedicated so stridently to choice, they are remarkably selective in the choices they are willing to allow other women to make. All four of these organizations and a host of others have been active in legislative initiatives intended to restrict the viability of home work–contracting, freelancing, consulting, and other off–site contract work that many women find the most compatible with their need to be with their young children. Even the Act for Better Child Care was intended at least partially to strike at the most common form of women's home business, the in–family day–care center. They have been active, too, against attempts to raise the dependent deduction for the federal income tax and against most serious attempts to retighten the divorce laws. As they once ignored the forces that first opposed and then derailed the ERA, they now ignore the forces that have begun to array against their two most cherished contemporary initiatives: federally funded day care and comparable–worth salaries. It would be worth their while to pay attention, in the case of day care, because what's happening on that front looks very much like the groundswell of anger that Phyllis Schlafly tapped. Last year, when a women's magazine ran an article on the ABC, advising stay–at–home mothers to make "common cause" with their working sisters in the interests of "choice," it received what even it admitted to be an avalanche of mail from furious women convinced that ABC was nothing more than a plot to force them out of their homes and away from their children.

As for comparable worth, it rests on a very shaky assumption, and that is that if we pay more for something, we will inevitably value it more. The better–paid an occupation is, this theory goes, the more respect and power it commands. But consider this: the starting salary for nurses in Westchester County is $37,500 a year. Benefits from day of hire include full medical and dental care, two weeks paid vacation, contributions to a life insurance policy and a pension that provides a nurse after twenty years' service with 80 percent of her salary rate in her last year of full–time employment for the rest of her life. Across the state line, in Connecticut, starting salaries for new hires at a major publisher of children's books are between $13,500 and $17,500 a year for women with B.A. degrees. After several years' service and three or four promotions to senior editor, that salary will increase to $26,500 a year. Benefits include medical and dental insurance for which employees must contribute 30 percent, no life insurance, and a pension plan that will provide an editor after twenty years' service with approximately a fifth of her last year's salary. Vacations are limited to five paid days for the first two years. Afterwards, they are limited to ten. If salary and benefits really mean anything, nursing should be a much more attractive career than publishing.

And yet, year after year, bright young women with degrees from Ivy League and Seven Sisters colleges go to work for that publishing company, and stay on. The nurses are drawn primarily from graduates of state colleges and hospital nursing schools, from young women who were graduated several rungs below their Ivy League sisters on the high school educational ladder. As everyone knows, publishing is a "glamorous" profession. Tell a man at a party that you're an assistant editor, and he will be impressed. Tell him you're a nurse, and he'll simply assume you're low–rent. The *best* women don't go into nursing.

It's no wonder that the new woman of the nineties has no self–respect. You cannot devalue motherhood without devaluing everything else women do. You cannot declare the primary work of most women throughout most of history to be beneath serious consideration without sending women the covert message that it is really women who are beneath serious consideration. You cannot train a whole generation of women in contempt for their mothers without training them in contempt for themselves. You cannot pronounce the lives of millions of women over thousands of years to be wasted without making women suspect that their lives will be wasted no matter what they do.

The New Woman of the nineties didn't need a society full of sexist men to make her believe she was worth nothing. She had the new wave of American feminism to do it for them–and, in the meantime, to provide them with ammunition. "Why," the senior senator from my state asked, when pressed to support a bill that would have eased the tax burden on women at home with children, "should I support a lot of women who aren't contributing anything to society?"

Of course the "best" women don't want to be nurses–and even the third–best women don't want to be child–care workers, in their homes or out. All that sort of thing is "women's work"–and as men have been telling us since time immemorial, and the feminist movement has been telling us for the last twenty–five years, women's work isn't worth anything.

Orania Papazoglou, a new contributor to *First Things*, has written a number of popular mystery novels, most recently *Once and Always Murder* (Doubleday).

Web: http://www.firstthings.com

Web: http://www.leaderu.com