Conservative Feminism and its Potential to Interact with, Influence, and Transform Traditional Feminist Identity

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ABSTRACT

The recent emergence of conservative female public figures has posed a challenge to the traditional notion of feminist thought. Although they define their particular form of success in terms of conservative ideology, many of these women operate according to feminist paradigms, and would not even have the opportunity to assume such a public role if it were not for the past feminist breakthroughs that have cleared the way. Their association with feminist logic and adoption of the feminist moniker notwithstanding, these conservative women most often speak out in reaction and opposition to traditional liberal feminist views and activism. Regardless of how the movement is principally defined, there seems to be a developing school of conservative feminist thought; whether or not it constitutes a legitimate movement that may counter or merge with feminism will have implications for the feminist identity and the shaping of various public policies regarding women’s interests.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The evolution of women’s rights and freedoms has been far from linear. Time has certainly seen the expansion of women’s freedoms in the United States, beginning with the Suffrage movement in the mid-19th century; it then proceeded through both World Wars and the steady push of women into the workplace, across the lines of Second Wave Feminism and into the highly diverse and ever-evolving Third Wave and what has most recently been dubbed the “post-feminism” of the present. However, instead of proceeding in a steady sequence, where each new victory builds upon those of the past, the history of women’s liberation has often proceeded in a one-step-forward, two-steps-back dynamic. To clarify this, it is important to understand how women’s increased participation in public roles was often directly related to whether or not it had social utility at the time, and not at all based on any rationale of women’s liberation. The influx
of women into the workplace during World Wars I and II is a prime example. The reality of women's limited roles and choices was “suspended for the duration” of the War, since the immediacy of addressing the war effort superseded the undesirability of women being able to freely earn a living (Anderson, Zinsser 215). However, this temporary distraction from controlling women's lives was reinstated after the War's end, when these gains were not only rolled back, but even reversed:

...the period after the First World War also witnessed a reassertion of the traditional limits on women's lives...women's traditional roles and functions were reasserted and often given the force of law. The opposition to women working outside the home, to making sexual and reproductive choices, and to women achieving equal education and participation in politics was powerful and effective (Anderson, Zinsser 207).

Only following the Second World War were many women able to secure and hold on to the right to be seen as more than cogs in the economic war mechanism, but rather as individuals with the capacity for self-fulfillment through productive labor, or at least, the choice to partake of the public sphere in as great a degree as they wished. Regardless, their freedom to work outside the home still continued to be delineated by how well they could strike the necessary and difficult balance between economic and domestic labor. Faced with this dilemma, many women were inadvertently led to recover a more conservative, traditional understanding of their roles, by which care of the household and family was made their primary duty.

Such a retreat to tradition is understandably anomalous to the current broad understanding of feminism as a movement based on liberal and progressive values, where the woman would never have to resign herself to being a housewife for lack of other alternatives. Although a large share of feminists still identify as progressive, it is becoming difficult to ignore the increasing presence of conservative women in American
politics. The website of Women in Congress notes that Democratic senators and representatives far outnumber their Republican counterparts; however, the proportion of conservative female politicians has been rising both in numbers and in public visibility ("Women in Congress"). Defying the norm of women's overwhelmingly liberal ideological position in the American political spectrum has also given conservative women a considerable amount of media attention, as news outlets are often eager to publicize and promote their unconventional views. The 2010 election boasted 14 Republican women candidates for the United States Senate, 94 running for House seats, and several high-profile gubernatorial candidates (Halloran). Most of these women neither made a show of their gender nor used it as a crutch—rather, many of them ran campaigns around pressing current political and economic issues, and those who did take advantage of their gender channeled it more towards getting the female vote rather than rallying around feminist causes.

Organizations such as the Independent Women's Forum have been successfully infiltrating everything from public policy to the media to college campuses with their specific brand of conservative female empowerment, pointedly directed against the liberal feminist establishment.\(^2\) Perhaps these are just plain indicators of what notable conservative feminist Christina Hoff Summers describes as the backlash to Second-wave radicalism\(^1\) "...by the midseventies, faith in liberal solutions to social problems had waned, and the old style fulfillment rapidly gave way to one that initiated women into an appreciation of their subordinate situation in the patriarchy and the joys and comforts of group solidarity" (23). Sommers fails to comment on the fact that much of early feminism's argumentation was likewise characterized by borderline assertions of essentialism and feminine morality, which appeared to elevate women in terms of morals and ideals while paradoxically maintaining their subordinate position to men. However, her statement does speak to the practicality of identifying persistent social
inequities and addressing them accordingly versus the often-understood, or perhaps misunderstood, idealistic desire of liberal feminists’ to transform society into a wholly genderless utopia while failing to zone in on and address specific issues.

To return again to women in politics—it can certainly be assumed that a group’s level of political participation is a good indicator of its position in society at large. Based on this assumption and the numbers to prove it, it is clear that liberal female politicians continue to hold more political offices, and seemingly also a higher political efficacy than their conservative counterparts. However, recent elections and conservative coalitions such as the Tea Party made names for politicians like Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann; public figures like Meghan McCain stand out among Republicans for expressing relatively progressive values; pundits such as Ann Coulter and Laura Ingraham have spewed anti-liberal rhetoric behind the guise of unapologetically conservative female personas. Many of these women have skyrocketed to prominence in the conservative feminist movement exactly by their public and vocal opposition to conventional liberal feminist beliefs.

Conservative feminist rhetoric is often inflammatory towards its ideological opposite, displaying categorical opposition both to the views and the methods of liberal feminists. Conservative spokeswomen have repeatedly challenged the notion that women need social and political assistance to achieve equality with men. They reject liberal feminists’ assertion that structural violence and an impenetrable patriarchal infrastructure are the source of gender inequality. Consequently, they consider taxpayer-funded social programs meant to address this issue an unnecessary drain on resources. The backlash to the feminist establishment is often framed on an issue basis: denial of the existence of a gender wage gap, downplaying the prevalence and effects of violence against women, opposing affirmative action programs such as Title IX, etc. The core of conservative feminist argument is that “women as a class do not suffer from
discrimination that merits government intervention,” and that such arguments are a
distraction from making actual political gains that will improve the lives of women in
general (Spindel 102; Stacey 562). However, not all conservative feminists express such
distaste for the feminist establishment—some, like the late Maureen Reagan, daughter of
President Reagan, may even be in favor of coalition building and potential collaboration,
believing that more than gender alone unites them with liberal feminists. Reagan, while
a staunch Republican, was also one of the most dedicated feminist public figures of her
time. One of the founders of the Republican Women’s Task Force, and a fervent
supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment, she is noted to have warned that the
Republican Party’s “rightwing orthodoxy would eventually open a huge gender gap along
partisan lines,” a prediction that has both unequivocally come true and continues to
persist to this day (Nichols).

Political views notwithstanding, many of these women exhibit an independence
and ambition traditionally more akin to feminism than conservatism. The group itself is
divided on the usage of this provocative term—many conservative women follow the
typical line and shun the label for its Second-wave, liberal, bra-burning, man-hating
connotations, even basing their whole identity on an opposition to feminism; others,
such as Sarah Palin, have audaciously appropriated the term and applied it to their
brand of empowerment, which centers on promoting conservative values. There is no
single uniform understanding of the term, and most of these women are neither seen as
singularly feminist by their audience and the general public, nor choose to identify with
the movement. Unsurprisingly, the feminist establishment has been neither welcoming
nor accommodating to conservative women; it could be said that this has backfired for
liberals, as it has pushed conservative women into a unique, almost fringe level status in
society, consequently causing an immediate and sensationalist appeal to the media and
the public.
A cursory literature review is enough to conclude that the topic of conservative feminism remains largely unexplored. The existence of organizations such as the Independent Women’s Forum (IWF), the Concerned Women for America (CWA), and the Network of Enlightened Women (NeW), shows that an organized and active conservative women’s movement has been underway for some time. As someone who largely identifies with liberal feminist beliefs, I am interested in exploring the possibility for a multifaceted feminism that would integrate different ideological perspectives beyond the single establishment view, as well as the potential this would have to tie feminism into a cohesive whole in which every woman can find either a representative voice or a venue through which she may speak herself. Columnist Meghan Daum raises an unexpected but highly perceptive point in the case for inclusivity; she accuses too many people of “walking the walk without talking the talk,” meaning that while classically feminist attitudes are prevalent among women today, many women shrink back from actually owning and claiming the title of feminists. She continues: “Part of the fault lies with those who believe in gender equality but avoid the word, souring its reputation and undermining principles they actually hold quite dear” (Daum). It is easy to see how the possibility of reconciling these two ideological forms of women’s empowerment opens up a wide arena for mutual understanding and cooperation, through the preservation and sharing of values, which may positively affect women’s interests and place them, as a bloc, in a highly favorable political position.

But the question remains: how does an entire group, which may even have varying levels of internal cohesiveness within itself, surpass the inevitable stumbling block of ideology, which can make every disagreement seem fundamental, if not insurmountable? From a feminist view, some conservative policies, such as the choice not to support affirmative action for female politicians, may seem downright regressive. “That they have chosen not to actively encourage and support women’s moving into
elected public leadership positions suggests the need as women's organizations to appeal
to and mobilize their conservative allies, at the risk of allowing feminists to maintain a
stronghold on this strategy” (Schreiber 53). One may pose the question, if they do not
feel the need to advocate for women to address their concerns in the public arena, why
do they even organize? Much of this can be explained by observing one of the basic
differences between liberal and conservative ideologies, often simply reduced to the
difference between individual and collective action, faith in the system or the recognition
of and desire to combat structural inequality.

In order to start exploring the different directions of feminist discourse today,
most notably the key distinction between liberal and conservative feminist values, one
must first understand feminism's distinct ideological roots. The movement that
fundamentally turns on the principle of full equality of the sexes has had an
unsurprisingly fragmented philosophical trajectory. Well into the present, it remains
divided into several ideological categories which only overlap in limited ways. This
research will avoid describing the ideological distinctions between different branches of
feminism, as there are simply too many to number, not all of which are even entirely
relevant to the research question. Instead, the main focus will be on the manifestations
of contemporary liberal feminism in its most broad understanding, and how it is
historically, theoretically, and pragmatically distinct from conservative feminist
discourse.

To research the origins, identity, and potential future of a conservative feminist
movement, I will first focus on the fundamental differences in motivation and objectives
of such groups over time, interpreting them through the context of establishment
feminist paradigms and rhetoric. Although feminist academia and literature has not
exactly acknowledged or defined, and has often even ignored the presence and input of
conservative feminism, it would be incorrect to assume that conservative authors and
views have been completely absent from the discourse. Although gender equality is the
nominal basis for the women’s movement, many of its core theoretical precepts lend
themselves to a multi-dimensional analysis, explaining the fragmentation of the
movement itself. For instance, Jean Bethke Elshtain bases part of her feminist critique
on differentiating between several feminist currents of thought, such as liberal feminism,
radical feminism, Marxist feminism, and psychoanalytic feminism (201-297). She
describes the objectives of each strand and their success or failure in meeting these,
therefore evaluating their relative strengths and weaknesses. Her argument emphasizes
the complex and divergent roots of a movement that superficially implies a uniformity of
purpose. Such a comprehensive analysis also implies the fallacy of narrowly generalizing
the common understanding of the term ‘feminism.’ The “cultivated cognitive image”
evoked by the term is a label-based oversimplification that persists in the collective
consciousness and significantly affects the popular and cultural perception of the
movement (Buschman, Lenart 72). It is clear to see how such a stereotype often alienates
many “incognito” feminists even of liberal, but particularly of conservative ideology,
limiting their identification with the feminist movement altogether.

Upon closer scrutiny, even some of the most revolutionary movements in
feminist history present an ideological paradox. While the basic goal of the Suffrage
movement was to secure the right to vote, the actual justification of the cause varied even
among the women actively involved in it. Many prominent Suffragists did indeed join the
movement for the purpose of increasing women’s political independence, but their
method often consisted of accentuating their biological identity to present women as a
moralizing force that would transform the corrupt and dehumanizing face of public and
political life. Elshtain argues that “what the Suffragists did by accepting a definition of
themselves that arose out of their powerlessness, that meant embracing their purity and
suffering, was to reinforce a set of presumptions which were strongly arrayed against
female political participation and socio-economic equality” (236). In terms of how it affected women’s position in the public and political realm, it can be said that the 19th amendment gave them the right to vote but resulted in visibility and presence without accountability or consequence.

Accepting one’s biological distinctions is part and parcel of embracing a feminine identity; the question remains of whether and to what extent biological characteristics should govern women’s participation in public life. A case for the affirmative, to any extent, would require a series of practical considerations that manifest themselves in the development of public policy, in order to accommodate the biological distinctions such as reproduction, which affect women’s full engagement outside the home. Conservative feminism fits into this paradigm by presupposing its own set of values governing the relationship between biology and women’s empowerment. Contemporary conservative feminist attitudes find significant common ground with many assumptions of early and First-wave feminism, including this biological rationale for female separateness. Although they acknowledge women’s equality in all spheres of public life, conservative women who have progressed into highly visible public roles tend to retain at least some of the still prevalent notions of female exclusivity, which often originate in biological identity. These are most commonly identified with the role of motherhood and a woman’s position in the family dynamic, concurrent with and in opposition to her potential roles in public and economic life. To simplify analysis, the significant impact of religion and religious groups on conservative politics will be minimized in favor of a theoretical and scholarly approach, and the feminist conservative identity will be treated as completely separate from any religious influence as possible.

The visibility and success of conservative feminist organizations, and their significant if not underestimated historical contribution to feminism, may serve to legitimize the existence of a viable movement. However, instead of owing thanks to
Second-wave liberal feminist activism for giving them the opportunity to have a political voice, many conservative women unabashedly criticize the entire establishment. This is problematic and contradictory to their own cause, because rather than providing a constructive evaluation of feminism as basis for their critique, many of these independent and outspoken women construct their entire identity and activism on a categorical opposition to the movement. It may be necessary to reassess their rhetoric, because conservative organizations will be taken seriously only if they “respond to the efforts and successes of the feminist movement” (Schreiber 56). Likewise, the liberal feminist establishment may benefit from acknowledging that inclusivity does not mean that one side has to prevail, but that, if common interest can be identified and pursued, differences can be bridged in the interest of cooperation and working towards constructive gains for women. Given all these ideological and their pursuant practical considerations, could a conservative women’s movement, which depends upon, parallels, and overlaps feminism, cause feminism to reformulate its strategy and become more inclusive towards the diverse groups that have come to represent women’s empowerment today?

THE ORIGINS OF CONSERVATIVE FEMINIST THEORY

Observing the origins of feminism as a whole, the blurring ideological lines are the first strong indicator of a possibility for the reconciliation of liberal and conservative feminist ideologies through a retreat to common origins. Although radical feminism— one of the more extreme fringes of the movement—and conservative feminism may seem like night and day, “feminists should not simply dismiss new conservative thought, for there is radical feminist ancestry to several of the themes that conservatives develop” (Stacey 561). Just like any effort to uproot and challenge a deeply entrenched set of beliefs as socially pervasive as liberal feminist rhetoric, conservative feminism is both a
radical and reactionary movement. Its spokeswomen exhibit a confidence in the existing structure of gender relations, a reconciliation of their private and public identities, a dedication to the libertarian values of individualism and free enterprise, and of course, a commitment to opposing establishment feminist doctrine on nearly all issues (Spindel 101-102).

Borrowing from theories of classical liberalism, conservative women seem to place a great deal confidence in the individual's ability to succeed independently, while one of the hallmarks of liberal feminism is the need to address, oppose, and overcome the still-prevalent structural hindrances to women's advancement. Liberal feminists would argue that the individual woman, regardless of being equipped with the highest faculties of ability and reason, can only achieve so much on her own without the correct institutions in place to encourage and facilitate her success. Nancy Chodorow, who explores the sex/gender organization of parenting and its social and political implications, says that the appearance of feminism as a movement has helped articulate many challenges resulting from the inextricable tie of feminine identity to mothering; before feminism, she says, "social and psychological commentators put the burden of solution for these problems onto the individual and did not recognize that anything was systematically wrong" (214).

Feminism as a philosophy and movement was founded in the tradition of classical liberalism, where leveling the playing field between men and women was of prime concern, manifesting itself in the focus on securing women's legal status through suffrage, family and property rights, and equal access and opportunity. Progressive and evolving social attitudes, in tandem with women's activism, have repeatedly expanded the definition of the rights and freedoms that women could reasonably seek. Despite these various new perspectives through which to observe the woman's condition in society, conservatives such as Sommers ardently subscribe to the original view of
feminism, claiming that it upholds women's full equality with men both publicly and privately, acknowledging that women have not only the ability but also the opportunity to make choices that lead to the highest degree of satisfaction with both their personal and social status and roles (Sommers 22). Conservative feminism therefore does not necessarily conflate with political or ideological conservatism, even claiming to aspire to completely distinct practical goals of liberation and emancipation from traditional and constraining legal, political, and social myths. However, conservative feminism also preaches consummate equality, never dominance of one gender or compensation for a history of institutional subordination of women. In fact, conservative feminists tend to believe this desire to overpower men in the public sphere, in order to assert women's own strength, only implies a weakness and flaw in the female character.

When it comes to the question of individual achievement, conservative feminists espouse a theoretical framework highly based on the philosophy of John Stuart Mill: that the highest pleasure for the individual lies in working towards the fulfillment of a personal life plan, and that the individual is both responsible for formulating and carrying out this plan independently, or as independently as possible under the circumstances (Wollheim xii). That last qualification, “as independently as possible,” is crucial to the rationale that liberal feminists often provide for women's continued lower rates of representation in the public sphere. Mill recognizes that his argument is idealistic, so he qualifies it by saying that this path to success may be plagued by more than a few obstacles. A liberal feminist would add that this is especially true if the subject in question is a woman, whose right to realize this path in life he fully acknowledges. In fact, in Mill's era, this obstacle-free path to success applied only to men, and even then only a select few; many liberal feminists would probably argue that not much has changed centuries later. Conservative women tend to publicly extol their high value for the virtue of self-sufficiency in women, occasionally getting so caught up in this as to fail
to acknowledge how the Second-wave feminists before them effectively paved the way for their chance to speak out so vocally, or have the choice to pursue a public presence and identity that extends beyond caring for their family and children.

Mill’s theory on the fulfillment of an individual life plan is a highly personal concept with the internal assumption that each individual possesses the rational capacity to choose the most appropriate means to reach this goal, as well as the security to be unhindered in this deliberative process. The conservative notion in Mill’s philosophy is that the individual is the engine of his or her own success, but it also contains the arguably liberal notion that having the ability to map out a desired life plan is useless unless the individual has the means to realize it independently and unburdened by undue structural factors—“happiness requires freedom”. Furthermore, the need for individualized plans implies a “diversity of human nature,” which goes hand in hand with the concept that physical and biological differences do not determine an individual’s (at least theoretical) capacity to reach this highest stage of personal growth. Mill concedes that human nature is not uniform—the implication is that each person’s behavior is at least partially determined by self-interest, a necessary component of the pursuit of a life plan (Wollheim xii, xxv). The logical corollary to this is that, despite the common frame of reference of ‘women’s issues,’ it is just too simplistic to say that women as a homogeneous group pursue the same set of interests. It is evident from its very theoretical origin why feminism has diffused into a collection of vast and diverse movements all beneath the single umbrella of women’s interests, each claiming to be the most accurate representation of these interests.

Judith Evans shares this view of a heterogeneous women’s movement, arguing that it is not practical to view women’s interests through a single dimension. “There is a lesson feminists have been slow to learn: that there are variations between groups and categories of women and that at the very minimum, one group does not speak for all”
(Evans 6). Her particular argument centers on how difference among feminist identities solidifies each one’s potential for engaging in identity politics because it defines association with a particular group. In the interests of uniformity, which leads to cooperation and integration of objectives, the case is clear that women are defined by far more than their biological characteristics, and that many are unwilling to relinquish their ideology or retailor their values and interests to conform to a standard of uniformity that compromises their practical interests for the sake of standardizing their experience as a gender. In other words, nature is not a force that predetermines the collective behavior of all members of a gender, but rather the nature of each individual shapes his or her unique idea of how best to pursue life’s greatest good. This seems to be a point where both liberal and conservative philosophy can converge: liberals for their value of freedom and opposition to uniformity of nature or experience, and conservatives for the emphasis on independence and individual accountability.

On the one hand, Mill’s philosophy would appear to support this highly individual pursuit of success that seems to align with many conservative women’s sense of separateness and marginality from the mainstream feminist movement. But on the other, he sweeps away the idea of diverging interests, instead arguing the notion that “human diversity is essentially correlated with diversity of opinion” where “conflicting opinion, unlike, say conflicting interest, does not have to remain in a permanent posture of confrontation” (Wollheim xxiii). This is a major argument in favor of the possibility for cross-cooperation, if not reconciliation, among ideologically diverse women’s groups; however, it also again inspires the necessity to actually define, as uniformly as possible, what constitutes a woman’s interest. Mill resolves this by recommending that while ignoring differences is certainly not helpful to the cause, minute disagreements of opinion should not be the barrier to cooperation towards a common interest. The follow-up question is whether common interest is even slightly ideologically-based, or is it
simply an end where all those pursuing it enjoy full security and fulfillment, regardless of
the path they took to get there?

Relying on such broad categories of definition carries the additional risk of
bordering on essentialism, a concept that will be discussed in more detail where it
concerns how women’s biological characteristics are reflected in a social setting. Even
Mill is not immune from reverting to this assumption, despite his belief in the
independence and diversity of all human beings and their right to fulfill their personal
plans for happiness. Despite denying that biological differences affect women’s ability to
pursue and achieve their personal goals, he nonetheless acknowledges that the sexual
division of labor, along with several other factors that practically constrain the woman
from self-fulfillment, falls under the natural norms of socialized gender dynamics
(O’Sullivan See 183). Male supremacy continues to be fueled by the tacit approval and
enabling of the separation of public and private life, the state and civil society, which
allows women to be defined in terms of their “essential” biological function of
childbearing, and not their abilities. This system is largely what keeps women’s
liberation incomplete—unlike the individual of Mill’s philosophy, the generic woman
may possess all the reason and ability to pursue her happiness, but be denied the
resources necessary to do so.

Depending on the different ways in which women find themselves situated within
the social and economic infrastructure, feminism may have both individualist and
collectivist manifestations. Liberal feminists have traditionally been champions of
collective effort, engaging in activism with the purpose of improving the lives of women
by fighting for political and social policies and advantages, such as affirmative action,
reproductive rights, and maternity leave. Women who are ideologically conservative, on
the other hand, may still label themselves as feminists (indeed, the Independent
Women’s Forum openly expresses this view), while adamantly opposing government
action meant to supplement or improve certain social, political, educational, or healthcare policies that are disadvantageous to women. Collectivism may not be the rationale behind their activism, but considering they seek to improve the lives of, or at the very least to represent, an entire plane of women of similar needs and views, should conservative women not have some notion of a broader goal in mind? The fact that they continue to organize around specific issues shows that while their methodology may preach self-assured independence, their reach is certainly not intended to be narrow. Conservative feminism may help breed an entire troupe of women confident in their ability to succeed, who on this path may run into various practical examples of Mill’s insinuated obstacles. To be completely honest, this applies far more broadly than just to conservatives—most women are not exempt from this situation, regardless of ideology. However, in seeking to address it, they may find that strictly adhering to ideology may be the least helpful method of overcoming the barricade created by structural impediments to gender equality.

MOTHERHOOD & LABOR

One of the primary differences between liberal and conservative schools of feminist thought would be how each treats the role of biology in determining female social and political mobility. Even in the 21st century, connecting biology to women’s public roles is not as large of a leap as it may seem, considering that woman’s biological role and identity as mother and giver of life has often metamorphosed into the social identities of caretaker of the family and household, and broadly as a beacon of morality and purity. “Being a mother...is not only bearing a child—it is being a person who socializes and nurtures” (Chodorow 11). Such biologically-based assumptions have successfully served the purpose of placing, and keeping, women in what is commonly referred to as the “private sphere.” The biological justification for this social role has
affected women’s chances of socially and politically breaking out the private sphere realm. It is therefore clear that the biological identity of women has been inextricably tied to their public presence, with the expected effect that this dominion over the private sphere would preclude, or at least hinder their opportunity to participate in public life and political decision-making. In consequence, women’s interests and priorities are not publicly reflected or represented in a way that is proportional to the number and size of their group.

“Motherhood as a symbol...is the antithesis of liberation. It has been used to enclose women with their children in the shrinking domestic domain and to put both practical and psychological impediments in the way of women’s participation in the world of work and politics” (Gieve 38). In a practical sense, a prolonged absence from the public sphere to devote time to the responsibilities of parenting, affects even educated and qualified women by removing them from the workforce and allowing their skills to languish. Thus, the biological and natural characteristics that define women as mothers often simultaneously limit them, creating contradictions that inspire a crisis of identity and a struggle to achieve balance between private and public roles (Chodorow 211).

While liberal feminist theorists often wrestle with the effect of motherhood on a woman’s identity construction and freedom to fully engage her capacities in areas such as work and professional life, conservatives tend to downplay the social significance of the role in favor of an almost uncontested acceptance of the woman’s biological imperative as a status-granting condition within the family and society.

Constructing women’s identity so strictly around biology, and more specifically around the role and function of motherhood, places a certain burden on their capacity to suppress or restrict this biological mandate in favor of a more participatory public role outside the home and family realm. For many women, the balancing act between the roles of mother and working professional is often accompanied by a significant degree of
guilt, which is virtually unheard of when referring to men in the same situation. While this ambivalence may be partly based in a woman’s conflict with her personal maternal instinct, to whatever degree she may possess this, it is also highly affected by the social pressure to maintain a moralizing and nurturing influence within the family unit. The vestiges of such archaic traditional social norms persisted well into the 20th century, and cannot be said to be fully eradicated even today. Within the span of the last 100 years, in 1931, Pope Pius XI “called for an end to married women’s employment on the grounds that it debased ‘the womanly character and the dignity of motherhood, and indeed of the whole family, as a result of which the husband suffers the loss of his wife, the children of their mother, and the whole family of an ever watchful guardian” (Anderson, Zinsser 208). The idea of the woman as the moral locus of the family and society surpassed such religious rationalization to become an uncontested reality deeply entrenched in the very secular social fabric of patriarchy.

Defying expectations brought on by the expansion of women’s rights and freedoms, these pressures persist and thrive well into the modern period. While the wording and motivation may change according to the times, the basic premise remains: “Just like the eighteenth-century philosophers who attacked mothers for failing to breast-feed their own children, twentieth-century experts criticized women for warping their children and so contributing to society’s decline if they did not nurture correctly.” Such regimented criticism magnifies the responsibility that women have, through their role as mothers, to direct the moral trajectory of society as a whole. It also implies that the role of breadwinner, whether performed as a supplement or a replacement to the primary role of mother, pushes the woman into a state of “slavery” where she is subjected both to the whims of the marketplace and to those of men as an entity (Anderson, Zinsser 220, 209).
Responding to these pressures, many conservative women have undertaken a process of re-embracing motherhood as an essential function; while this would not have seemed unusual one hundred years ago, before women even earned the right to vote, the contemporary conservative feminists have had to contend with creating a dynamic appropriate to their times, which balances the roles of mother and professional. In this scheme, they held tight to the notion that mothering “remains a potent source of self-identity, satisfaction, and autonomy...” (Sayer 298). The distinction between the conservative and liberal interpretations here is that, while the liberal view explicitly encourages women to break out of constraining traditional norms that seek to govern a woman’s place in society, the conservative makes peace with such roles, even encouraging a woman’s full dedication to the domestic realm if an appropriate balance cannot otherwise be found. Many scholars are far more blunt about the connection between conservatism and the yielding of identity through motherhood; Katherine Gieve says that “to admit to the passion and obligation of being a mother, and indeed the particularity of being a mother, is to consign yourself to a conservative role and abandon the possibility of power and independence” (39). Many liberal feminists share the concern that this line of thought may encourage those women who are already exhausted with the impossibility of balancing their dual roles of mother and working professional to simply resign themselves to the full-time role of mother not from personal choice, but as a result of an unfavorable manipulation of social, economic, political, and personal circumstances. Furthermore, if motherhood is inherently a conservative function, is committing to this role even feasibly compatible with leading an otherwise independent and fulfilling existence?

The liberal view would argue that in an egalitarian society, a woman would neither be pressured to have a family and children, nor, in the event that she chooses to, be forced to compromise between two conflicting identities. Since the practical
impossibility of managing both household and workplace duties is often imposed by a set of circumstances beyond women’s control, the decision to retreat to the household and family is clearly not a voluntary one. It is foreseeable that many liberal feminists would accuse the conservative women who choose family over career of taking the line of least resistance and refusing to fight for the very plausible reconciliation of these two roles in a personally and economically fulfilling arrangement. However, considering the previously stated confrontation between a feminist identity and the role of mother, alleged to be a servile and sacrificial arrangement entirely opposed to the liberating tendencies of feminism, it is unclear whether liberal feminists have even come to terms with how to rightfully incorporate motherhood into the division of labor. Add to that the frustration many women have felt with the expected liberation that was to ensue with the Second-wave feminist movement and its accompanying struggle for gender equality in public and private life. Having the opportunity to pursue higher levels of formal education and aim for ambitious professional positions did not liberate women from the roles of mother or caretaker. In many cases, it only placed an additional burden on the already overworked woman, with the result that “mostly [women] have found that they work long hours at home and long hours on the job” (Hooks 49). If being liberated means taking on a career in addition to the job of domestic work and mothering, it can be understood why the pressure to elect one of these options is a serious point of struggle in the life of the contemporary woman, liberal and conservative alike.

Another shade of meaning can be drawn through a breakdown of terminology and its connotations. Gieve offers a concise argument for how the terminology a woman uses can impact how she views her particular identity in the context of the experience of motherhood. She states that the term ‘being a mother’ suggests “an occupation which involves your whole identity” whereas simply ‘mothering’ involves “a more limited and active endeavor” (39). Thus construed, it is again evident that motherhood presents
significant challenges to a feminist identity: transforming, maintaining, and reclaiming a personal character and identity throughout the process, balancing personal and family needs, surrendering one’s own freedom or time to the exigent demands of another human being. The transformation that motherhood wreaks on the woman is not standardized, but rather highly personalized and individual; consequently, there is a concern in attempt to reduce the role to any sort of uniform terminology relating to the nature of its work or its capacity to absorb all other potential roles of the woman in its favor.

Here is another note of caution when it comes to defining motherhood as work: it implies that there is a single, or a limited few, proper ways to perform this role. It also places responsibility for the children’s future behavior, i.e. the relative success or failure of their upbringing, wholly on the shoulders of the mother, while ignoring the external and environmental influences on a child’s socialization and development (Gieve 42). The battle here is over practicalities, but the truth is that becoming a mother carries enormous personal, psychological, political, and economic implications, all of which combined determine the benefit that mothers or women hoping to become mothers may incur from this role. Acknowledging the significance of women’s work as mothers may not make the perception of motherhood more palatable to liberal feminists; many of them take issue with the fact that motherhood is viewed as an extension of the natural idea of femininity, invoking a gendered functional identity based entirely on biology, which results in a standardized and predictable response, and a limitation on a woman’s autonomy. What liberal feminists often fail to accept is that many women willingly embrace their identity as mothers, and would be much better served having options to exercise their independence. The ordinary woman may certainly acknowledge and feel the strain of her position in her family and society, without thinking twice about the disputed theoretical discourse on this role. Instead of wrestling over the theoretical
limitations of a role many women sincerely feel an affinity to perform, these feminists may better serve the women they claim to represent by leaving theory aside and presenting the reality of women's constraints in the domestic sphere in a manner which is accessible and relatable to most women.

Intersecting motherhood with domestic work in general, and viewing it through its economic context, raises additional questions of how feminism should address the imbalance of public and private roles, as well as whether women's necessary and important, but economically disadvantageous and unrewarding household work should be acknowledged as equal to men's work outside the home and incorporated into the marketplace dynamic. The sexual division of labor, based on biologically predisposed functions, results in a sex-based duality of sharply defined labor roles. "The work of maintenance and reproduction is characterized by is repetitive and routine continuity, and does not involve specified sequence or progression. By contrast, work in the labor force—"men's work"—is likely to be contractual, to be more specifically delimited, and to contain a notion of defined progression and product" (Chodorow 179). It is also likely to have a significantly higher degree of reward, whereas women's domestic tasks are often ordinary and routine (Sayer 291).

Opinions diverge regarding the issue of granting economic value and reward to women's household and domestic labor. On the one hand, motherhood defined as work "attributes status to women who are usually deprived of it in a society where work in the marketplace is highly valued" (Gieve 40). This assertion calls upon the fact that there is more to motherhood than biology—namely, that it is a learned skill with its own measure of success or failure. However, there remains the question of whether giving motherhood the status of work would be a feasible endeavor, given that motherhood is not statistically measurable, the outputs may not be immediately evident, and there is no way to gauge daily achievement. Gieve is opposed to this idea, arguing that motherhood
is a relationship rather than an economic function, with the children receiving most of the benefits and the mother only profiting from them vicariously. Perhaps surprisingly, many liberal feminists have not championed the cause, as they hold a similar and quite conservative stance that the commodification of domestic labor and other private functions will do nothing but devalue its significance even further, turning it into a service to be bought and sold (Meagher 52).

While it seems that the push to acknowledge and even compensate women's domestic work may appear to have all the trappings of a liberal cause—which may well be the truth—it is interesting to note that this subject has been taken up by conservative writers such as Penelope Leech, who, “have tried to persuade us that in bringing up children we are doing a job and should therefore not seek another one” (Gieve 40). So, while liberal feminists may approach the issue by trying to place a value on the work of women who are limited from seeking outside employment by the structural violence of patriarchy, and conservative feminists addresses the issue strictly out of a reverence for motherhood, both seem to arrive at the same conclusion: women's role as mothers, and the attendant work it entails, can and should be considered in terms of its economic and social worth and compensated accordingly. It seems that the most practical solution would be one that strikes an ideological equilibrium which “sustains the positive nurturant aspects of mothering without subordinating women” (O'Sullivan See 192).

Psychologist Carl Jung is quoted as saying: “No one can evade the fact, that in taking up a masculine calling, studying, and working in a man's way, woman is doing something not wholly in agreement with, if not directly injurious to, her feminine nature” (Anderson, Zinsser 219-220). And yet, while very few scholars dispute the fact that working outside the home is integral to women's freedom of choice on what Mill would call their path of self-fulfillment, it may well be worth considering whether the manner in which women's economic participation in this country is structured serves
their best interests. At the onset of the feminist movement, stepping out into the workforce was essentially synonymous with liberation. Many women embraced this opening based on the assumption that it would level gender relations in professional life, with the eventual hope of achieving full equality with men in positions of power and prestige in the workforce. However, bell hooks argues that what skewed this visionary ideal in practice was that this liberating notion was not nearly as grounded in economic self-sufficiency as it should have been. Work alone is not liberating—plenty of women worked out of necessity long before the feminist movement combined these two concepts into a formal agenda. Work is only liberating if it leads to economic independence by virtue of “self-actualization,” reducing women’s reliance on men and, more broadly, on an institutionalized patriarchy, for economic sufficiency (49, 52). By an unforeseen turn of circumstance, the influx of women into the workforce and their recognition of the challenges both for advancement and for balancing their public and private roles, may have perhaps had the paradoxical effect of discouraging women from entering the workforce altogether.

Closely related to this, a major concern regarding women’s professional advancement is whether the capitalist economic climate, created by and for men, is even suited to their needs. In this professional landscape, do women gain or lose by emulating men? Women do not enjoy the security of an economic arrangement constructed to accommodate them; instead, they “mediate between the social and cultural categories which men have defined” (Chodorow 180). It is worth noting that women co-opting masculinity as part of their identity is much more socially acceptable than the opposite (men acting feminine), as it serves to grant prestige to the woman who chooses to seek status outside of her biologically assigned functions (Sayer 287). One need not look far for proof that the economic marketplace is structured in a way that favors men, just a few examples being the absence of an adequate maternity leave policy or the controversial
issue of nursing on the job. The lack of effective public policy meant to address these and
similar matters reflects the relatively low national political significance of many women’s
issues, further emphasizing the fact that comprehensive measures and policies on
women’s issues would benefit every woman—liberal, conservative, even completely
apolitical, who chooses to pursue both a career and family.

Returning to Mill’s theoretical concept of individual fulfillment and its
importance to the formation of a wholesome human personality, which seems mutually
agreeable to both liberal and conservative ideology, it can be said that a woman has the
right to seek fulfillment whether through her biological role, her social freedom to
pursue a career or work outside the home, or a combination of both. The power dynamic
and sexual division of labor should not interfere with the deliberative process that
assigns varying degrees of value and importance to these principles. Furthermore, the
constraints of biological imperative, and its further use to justify the social subjugation of
the female sex, does not squarely affect only ideologically conservative or ideologically
liberal women, but rather all women who have attempted to reconcile these roles.
Chodorow uses psychoanalytical theory to argue that inasmuch as nature imposes on
women's reproductive autonomy, it is artificial social arrangements that are at fault for
having fostered a development of certain values and institutions that have allowed
women’s biological identity to limit their public participation. To overcome these
limitations, society must construct a labor division of familial and economic roles that is
fair and equitable to both genders (34, 219).

An article by The Nation highlights the disparity between women’s perceived
status and the practical consequences of social gender dynamics. It comments on and
critiques the statistic that women are now receiving more higher education degrees than
men, tempering this fact with a dose of reality: many of these same women, when faced
with the prospect of having children and a family, must resign themselves to not working
simply because it is not economically feasible to throw their entire salary into paying for
daycare or household services (Covert). “The lack of adequate work-family policies and
gender inequality in employment mean that many women and men instead ‘choose’ full-
time employment for men and part-time employment for women” (Sayer 298). It is clear
how the absence of proper social policy can engender and perpetuate a sexual division of
labor, which refers back to women’s biological identity as mothers and caretakers
relegated to the private sphere: “In the case of mothering, the economic system has
depended for its reproduction on women’s reproduction of particular forms of labor
power in the family. At the same time, income inequality between men and women
makes it more rational, and even necessary, in any individual conjugal family for fathers,
rather than mothers, to be primary wage-earners” (Chodorow 35). On the other hand, if
this limiting nature is understood and channeled to positive ends, social policy can be a
powerful tool to encourage the leveling out of gender relations with an eye to promoting
gender fairness and equality in labor. Conservatives may be disinclined to consider
solutions based on government welfare, but subsidizing childcare for both men and
women who wish to stay at home with their children may have a serious role in reducing
the stigma associated with domestic labor and eliminating its gendered associations by
normalizing the equal participation of men in household work (hooks 52).

Materializing women’s interests into practical action to create policy shows the
significance of their biological and social duality, as well as the need for them to balance
the roles that derive from their biological identity with the voluntary social, economic,
and productive roles that aim to reach the enlightened goal of personal fulfillment.
Liberal and conservative feminists alike share these aspirations; claiming a single one of
these identities, especially the biological one, as preeminent, simply is not in line with
the feminist rhetoric of liberation. A basic interpretation of feminism implies the need to
counterbalance the woman’s biological identity, allowing her to recapture her
independence and autonomy from her reproductive role, and granting the freedom to
define the role itself as a temporary engagement that does not consume her entire
identity. “Women’s mothering is central to the sexual division of labor. Women’s
maternal role has profound effects on women’s lives, on ideology about women, on the
reproduction of masculinity and sexual inequality, and on the reproduction of particular
forms of labor power” (Chodorow 11). The biological function of mothering is therefore
inextricably linked to participation in economic labor arrangements via creation of the
inevitable intermediary of the sexual division of labor, which is caused by biological
factors yet affects social ones. While conservative and liberal feminists may disagree
about how restrictive women’s biological identity really is upon their social participation,
it is evident through the reflection of biology on social roles that any woman who chooses
to overcome these restrictions, regardless of her ideology, will inevitably face the same
set of challenges. Hooks identifies economic liberation as a concept with serious unifying
potential for feminists of diverse convictions, saying that “addressing the economic
plight of women may ultimately be the feminist platform that draws a collective
response...the issue that unites all women” (54). With biology an ever-present limiting
force drawing women back into traditional roles, or forcing them to adopt an incomplete
liberated feminist identity, cooperation on this front must be based on acknowledging a
common interest in pursuing liberation grounded in economic self-sufficiency and not in
the least determined or limited by biology.

CONTEMPORARY OUTCOMES: POLITICS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In the mid-20th century, the existence of a prolific Republican feminist movement
was not nearly as alien in the American political landscape as it would be today.
Conservative women formed the backbone of many GOP initiatives, some of which went
so far as to support policies like the Equal Rights Amendment or affirmative action for
women and minorities, policies which presently conjure up an intuitive ideological
dismay in the minds of conservatives nationwide. In 1972, proposed affirmative action
reforms regarding representation of women, minorities, and youth in Republican Party
congressional delegations seemed to garner either support or, at the very least, a healthy
ideological debate meant to find the best way to expand the base of the Party. The
Republican Party still boasted a significant membership of women, self-proclaimed
feminists, who supported the effort to make the party more friendly and inclusive to
women’s interests, actively pursuing policies that would lead to more social and political
benefits for women.

However, everything changed with the eruption of Second-wave feminism, a
decidedly activist liberal political movement meant to challenge and transform existing
notions of female sexual, political, social, and cultural identity. Second-wave feminism
split the Republican Party into those who identified with the fight against gender-based
oppression and eventually defected to the Democratic Party, and those who feared its
militant brand of activism and its recurrent challenge of tradition. These subversive
qualities of the Second-wave planted a fear among the staunch conservative
establishment, inciting a backlash that, in its sense of urgency to counter the liberal
terrorist explosion, would inadvertently reverse and threaten many of the gains and
objectives that progressive Republican feminists had theretofore fervently supported
(Rymph 188-238).

The existence of moderate and even liberal factions of Republican feminists is
reflected in the existence of such groups as The National Women’s Political Caucus.
Considering the often hostile interactions among present-day liberal and conservative
feminists, it comes as a surprise to learn that NWPC “was intended to be multipartisan
and, from the beginning, a number of Republican activists had been involved.
“Republicans were always a minority in the NWPC, but their presence made an
important statement about political feminism—that feminists had an interest in promoting women's involvement in electoral and party politics that transcended party affiliation” (Rymph 207). Although there were still recognizable differences in method, opinion, and type of activism and participation among liberal and conservative feminists, the lines seemed much more blurred than they are today; more importantly, the cognizance of a common interest united them in groups that transcended ideology in favor of coalition-building. In the process, the Republican women seemed not to have abandoned any trace of their party loyalty; in fact, even their feminist activism was framed to a significant degree by party agenda (Rymph 202). The existence of the NWPC therefore proves the possibility of maintaining ideological fealty while recognizing the bargaining power and advantage for concerted action that a broader, more inclusive coalition has over fragmented ideological factions.

Many conservative initiatives of the mid-twentieth century—including support for the ERA and affirmative action for women, minority groups, and youth—read like a page taken directly from today’s liberal feminist playbook. Their principles were based on the need to correct and compensate for a recognized imbalance in gender social roles, a pattern not only apparent but also well-grounded in theory. Espousing an equality that embraces difference as opposed to seeking sameness, Judith Evans argues that “...men simply ask for their rights, women for affirmative or compensatory action” (4). This is based on the liberal feminist premise that statistics and experience indicate that women both have limited opportunities and a lower rate of representation and visibility in the most prestigious career sectors and positions than men, i.e. that women essentially start out a few steps behind men. Vocal support for programs such as affirmative action shows that many conservative feminists had a real understanding of the challenges career women faced, a commitment to increasing the number of women in public roles, and on
a deeper level, an understanding of the structural limitations that stood between these dedicated women and their ambitions.

While conservative women of the Second-wave era articulated the concerns of underrepresented groups, they almost uniformly came from privileged backgrounds. A central characteristic of many mainstream feminist groups of this period is that its membership did not usually claim to speak authoritatively on behalf of, nor to, the oppressed woman. After all, this would have been highly hypocritical, considering the fact that a great percentage of the delegation consisted of privileged, financially and socially secure women. However, regardless of the NWPC’s lack of racial and class diversity, its stated aims seemed to reflect a sincere desire to expand the platform of the Republican Party and increase its appeal to a broader subset of the electorate. Rymph characterizes these conservative feminists as “relatively privileged women, who had personally experienced very few of the conflicts and frustrations that led other women to feminism,” but sought to “‘broaden their own understanding of women’s issues’” (200).

Certainly, these groups thrived more easily in the past, before the appearance of the Second-wave radicalism that many conservatives blame for declaring a sort of ultimatum on women’s interests, thus inciting an ideological rift and causing a fragmentation of conservative feminism. The break occurred not because of a lack of commitment to women’s rights, but because of the simple structure of the Republican Party, which favored those with political connections rather than allowing expression of special group interests” (Rymph 210).

Likewise conservative, but ideologically a far cry from the women’s organizations of fifty years ago, the Independent Women’s Forum is a contemporary group of self-proclaimed conservative feminists, who embody privilege and status and claim to steer women towards a sensible understanding of their identity, place in society, and perhaps most significantly, political and civil involvement. A significant number of these women
come from the ranks of the Republican Party establishment, with many sharing one defining commonality: a powerful husband. Chodorow recognizes this phenomenon as conformity to the biologically-rooted social law by which the male grants status to the entire family unit, and “the wife... is viewed as deriving her status and class position mainly from her husband, even if she also is in the labor force and contributes to the maintenance of the family’s life style” (179). Although it certainly does not apply to every woman in the group, the implication is that the status-granting connection with the male serves as a crucial point of entry into public life for a group of women who also tend to hold the belief that “women as a class do not suffer from discrimination that merits government intervention” (Spindel 100).

It is important to note that those women calling themselves conservative feminists today probably have very little in common with the original feminists of the Republican Party. Instead of promoting cooperation and seeking mutual understanding, both their views and their manner of articulation frequently emanate a hostility that the liberal feminist establishment likewise reciprocates. However, by failing to recognize each other’s legitimate claims to representing a certain group of women, both sides are equally culpable of cutting off dialogue prematurely. Instead, they tacitly acknowledge one another, while spewing a war of rhetoric in the public. Prominent liberal author Jessica Valenti acknowledges the existence of the conservative feminist movement, but denies its legitimacy, alleging that it has been co-opted by conservative figureheads who seem to be the sole representatives of the movement in her mind (“Who Stole Feminism?”). In order for political cooperation to occur, each side of the movement must judge the other by reasonable and fair standards, instead of criticizing the exclusivity of the other side while practicing the same themselves.

By all indicators, it seems that both ideological camps would agree that questioning women’s ability to balance their private and public roles is a patronizing
denial of the woman’s deliberative capacities. In a concise account of conservative feminist logic, Christina Hoff Sommers contrasts the political efficacy of women today with how it was centuries ago, when feminist philosophy was in its earliest stages:

...women are no longer disenfranchised, and their preferences are being taken into account. Nor are they now taught that they are subordinate or that a subordinate role for them is fitting and proper. Have any women in history been better informed, more aware of their rights and options? Since women today can no longer be regarded as the victims of an undemocratic indoctrination, we must regard their preferences as “authentic.” Any other attitude toward American women is unacceptably patronizing and profoundly illiberal (259-260).

While Sommers’ statement is encouraging in the sense that it motivates women to appreciate, acknowledge, and utilize the gains that have been made in their favor, it confuses the awareness of rights and freedoms and the deliberative capacity to act in knowledge of them, with the actual ability to take advantage of these favorable conditions in an unimpeded manner. But the opposite is often true, and women, while nominally entitled to pursue their interests, often find themselves besieged by the competing demands of society, family, biology, and personal identity. “Women today are expected to be full-time mothers and to work in the paid labor force, are considered unmotherly if they demand day-care centers, greedy and unreasonable if they expect help from husbands, and lazy if they are single mothers who want to receive adequate welfare payments in order to be able to stay home for their children” (Chodorow 213).

Without a doubt, the female identity and the biological and social significance of femininity will remain the subject of contentious personal and political debate. The conservative and liberal attempts to articulate a stance on femininity may have to reach back to fundamental understandings of biology and nature, as well encouraging past examples of political and social cooperation, to seek out constructive attempts to consolidate and reconcile their divergent views of a feminist identity.
CONCLUSION

In order to be taken seriously as feminists, conservative feminist groups must present a proactive agenda, one that aims toward wholesomeness and integration, instead of simply falling back on contradicting the feminist establishment on each account. The conservative feminists of today must look upon their ancestors of fifty years ago, and demonstrate why the liberal feminist issues that they oppose are insignificant to American women; or if they are in fact substantial issues, to propose alternative solutions to address them through policy or activism. The only danger would be to mistakenly grant authority to explanations based on essentialism, which may temporarily elevate the woman into a false position of uniqueness and superiority, but ultimately only serve to perpetuate subjugation and male-dominance. It is clear that any acceptance of the biological origins of social behavior “faces the danger that female virtue can be used against women, and has been. It may merely echo woman as described by patriarchy, may simply invert the dualisms we know” (Evans 78).

Crucial to surpassing ideological divides is the observance of where and how liberal and conservative forms of feminism have historically, theoretically, and practically overlapped. For example, the contentious divide among liberals and conservatives over whether feminism is even relevant to the contemporary woman’s condition, or conservatives’ general mistrust of liberal feminist strategies of advancing women’s goals, might be mitigated if conservatives acknowledged that Second-wave feminism essentially won their ability, as women, to openly advocate for their interests even through an alternative feminist platform. Many of liberal feminism’s most vocal opponents, such as Phyllis Schlafly, gained visibility due to a combination of pre-existing status (often conferred through connection with a powerful male) and the concurrent trend of women’s increased movement into public life which accompanied the advent of Second-wave feminism. Even though Schlafly and women like her “disparaged the
feminist movement, the movement's development was a crucial aspect of the political circumstances that had empowered her” (Rymph 239-240). If anything, the liberal feminist establishment arising from the Second-wave movement has been unquestionably effective and involved in influencing women to enter public life. However, it is also equally true that the bipartisan coalitions of the 1960s and 1970s, while less broad and sweeping in their agenda, demonstrate a more cooperative and politically effective method of bridging ideology in favor of concrete policymaking.

Despite the ease of pointing out differences between ideological camps both politically, and in the context of feminism, “the appearance of irreconcilability is a false impression that has been created and manipulated by political extremists on both sides” (Stacey 563). Ideology is intrinsically divisive, and it seems that currently, neither end is particularly more committed to overcoming it than the other; Sommers blames aggressive gender feminist ideology for “diverting the women’s movement from its true purposes,” and some of this is certainly evident in the ways in which modern women’s groups fail to find common ground (21). Where liberal feminists accuse conservatives of glossing over or disregarding issues of crucial significance or statistics that prove women’s continued subjugation, conservatives cringe at what they perceive as an image of the woman as helpless and subject to uncertain social currents of patriarchy that she cannot overcome independently. In either case, it seems that both camps would like to address and avoid the subjugation of women: liberals by attempting to free women from structural constraints, and conservatives arguing that women should avoid creating a false consciousness of subjugation that paradoxically keeps them from trying to break free from it. Still, it seems that on both ends, there are women willing to cooperate and adjust or transcend the comfort of their personal beliefs, and internalize the social diffusiveness of the biological concept of femininity.
Empowerment is defined by the objectives of the group fighting for it, and it is very much possible that there is no single universally accepted definition of women’s interest. It may be that this impossibility for consensus will continue to separate most women into ideologically-based categories of interests that fail to see at least some practical intersection among the interests of all women. However, it is not unrealistic to consider that even rigid ideological divides can be broken and bridged if the concept of mutual interest is allowed to develop organically, as was the case among the cross-party feminist coalitions of the mid-twentieth century. This project has attempted to clarify the understanding of biology’s role in determining the partition of a woman’s public and private roles by placing it within the context of political theory and practice to underline both the divergences and convergences between the dominant liberal and peripheral but growing conservative factions of feminist thought. The presence of conservative feminism has certainly caused a reaction from the liberal feminist establishment, but in order to foment action, many liberal feminist groups will have to willingly practice inclusivity and accept the potential for a challenge or transformation of beliefs, which may still seem like a far-flung hope. Based on theoretical premise and historical practice, it is to be concluded that the cross-cooperation of ideologically diverse women’s groups is not dependent upon creating an ideologically-free definition of women’s interests. The corollary to this exploration, and a means of testing it in practice, would be to identify the contexts and issues around which ideology is least polarizing and publicly recognize their significance and bearing in women’s lives. Guided by theory, these contexts and issues must be used to sweep aside the unquestioned assumptions that have dominated the mainstream understanding and perception of feminism, in a way that would apply such unifying principles to identify the most prescient way of addressing the challenges that lie at the intersection of the personal, social, political, and economic dimensions of women’s experience.
NOTES

1 First-wave feminism “arose in the context of industrial society and liberal politics” and was an organized effort to secure “access and equal opportunities for women.” Second-wave feminism “emerged in the 1960s to 1970s in postwar Western welfare societies, when other ‘oppressed’ groups such as Blacks and homosexuals were being defined and the New Left was on the rise.” It preached a message of women’s empowerment and was heavily grounded in the idea of sexual liberation. Third-wave feminism of the 1990s onward arose “in the context of information society and neoliberal, global politics” and “seeks to overcome the theoretical question of equity or difference and the political question of evolution or revolution, while it challenges the notion of ‘universal womanhood’ and embraces ambiguity, diversity, and multiplicity in transversal theory and politics” (Krolokke, Sorensen 1-2).

Post-feminism is a contemporary phenomenon represented by “women in their early 20s to mid-30s-who expressed disinterest in, alienation from, and discontent with feminism” (Buschman, Lenart).

2 The liberal feminist establishment is referred to as the structure espousing and campaigning for the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Represented by flagship groups such as the National Organization for Women and The Feminist Majority, it is highly involved in political activism and generally supports the belief that male dominance is perpetuated by the existing structural disadvantages to women’s freedom and equality. The movement claims a sharp distinction between the public and private sphere, and its main strategic purpose has been promoting the entry of women into the public realm via political channels (Elshain 228-229).
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