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Why Gender Equality Stalled

By STEPHANIE COONTZ

THIS week is the 50th anniversary of the publication of Betty Friedan's international best seller, "The Feminine Mystique," which has been widely credited with igniting the women's movement of the 1960s. Readers who return to this feminist classic today are often puzzled by the absence of concrete political proposals to change the status of women. But "The Feminine Mystique" had the impact it did because it focused on transforming women's personal consciousness.

In 1963, most Americans did not yet believe that gender equality was possible or even desirable. Conventional wisdom held that a woman could not pursue a career and still be a fulfilled wife or successful mother. Normal women, psychiatrists proclaimed, renounced all aspirations outside the home to meet their feminine need for dependence. In 1962, more than two-thirds of the women surveyed by University of Michigan researchers agreed that most important family decisions "should be made by the man of the house."

It was in this context that Friedan set out to transform the attitudes of women. Arguing that "the personal is political," feminists urged women to challenge the assumption, at work and at home, that women should always be the ones who make the coffee, watch over the children, pick up after men and serve the meals.

Over the next 30 years this emphasis on equalizing gender roles at home as well as at work produced a revolutionary transformation in Americans' attitudes. It was not instant. As late as 1977, two-thirds of Americans believed that it was "much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family." By 1994, two-thirds of Americans rejected this notion.

But during the second half of the 1990s and first few years of the 2000s, the equality revolution seemed to stall. Between 1994 and 2004, the percentage of Americans preferring the male breadwinner/female homemaker family model actually rose to 40 percent from 34 percent. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of full-time working mothers who said they would prefer to work part time increased to 60 percent from 48 percent. In 1997, a quarter of stay-at-home mothers said full-time work would be ideal. By 2007, only 16 percent of stay-at-home mothers wanted to work full time.

Women's labor-force participation in the United States also leveled off in the second half of the 1990s, in contrast to its continued increase in most other countries. Gender desegregation of college majors and occupations slowed. And although single mothers continued to increase their

hours of paid labor, there was a significant jump in the percentage of married women, especially married women with infants, who left the labor force. By 2004, a smaller percentage of married women with children under 3 were in the labor force than in 1993.

SOME people began to argue that feminism was not about furthering the equal involvement of men and women at home and work but simply about giving women the right to choose between pursuing a career and devoting themselves to full-time motherhood. A new emphasis on intensive mothering and attachment parenting helped justify the latter choice.

Anti-feminists welcomed this shift as a sign that most Americans did not want to push gender equality too far. And feminists, worried that they were seeing a resurgence of traditional gender roles and beliefs, embarked on a new round of consciousness-raising. Books with titles like “The Feminine Mistake” and “Get to Work” warned of the stiff penalties women paid for dropping out of the labor force, even for relatively brief periods. Cultural critics questioned the “[Perfect Madness](#)” of intensive mothering and helicopter parenting, noting the problems that resulted when, as Ms. Friedan had remarked about “housewifery,” mothering “expands to fill the time available.”

One study cautioned that nearly 30 percent of opt-out moms who wanted to rejoin the labor force were unable to do so, and of those who did return, only 40 percent landed full-time professional jobs. In “The Price of Motherhood,” the journalist Ann Crittenden estimated that the typical college-educated woman lost more than \$1 million dollars in lifetime earnings and forgone retirement benefits after she opted out.

Other feminists worried that the equation of feminism with an individual woman’s choice to opt out of the work force undermined the movement’s commitment to a larger vision of gender equity and justice. Joan Williams, the founding director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California’s Hastings College of the Law, argued that defining feminism as giving mothers the choice to stay home assumes that their partners have the responsibility to support them, and thus denies choice to fathers. The political theorist Lori Marso noted that emphasizing personal choice ignores the millions of women without a partner who can support them.

These are all important points. But they can sound pretty abstract to men and women who are stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to arranging their work and family lives. For more than two decades the demands and hours of work have been intensifying. Yet progress in adopting family-friendly work practices and social policies has proceeded at a glacial pace.

Today the main barriers to further progress toward gender equity no longer lie in people’s personal attitudes and relationships. Instead, structural impediments prevent people from acting on their egalitarian values, forcing men and women into personal accommodations and rationalizations that do not reflect their preferences. The gender revolution is not in a stall. It has hit a wall.

In today’s political climate, it’s startling to remember that 80 years ago, in 1933, the Senate

overwhelmingly voted to establish a 30-hour workweek. The bill failed in the House, but five years later the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 gave Americans a statutory 40-hour workweek. By the 1960s, American workers spent less time on the job than their counterparts in Europe and Japan.

Between 1990 and 2000, however, average annual work hours for employed Americans increased. By 2000, the United States had outstripped Japan — the former leader of the work pack — in the hours devoted to paid work. Today, almost 40 percent of men in professional jobs work 50 or more hours a week, as do almost a quarter of men in middle-income occupations. Individuals in lower-income and less-skilled jobs work fewer hours, but they are more likely to experience frequent changes in shifts, mandatory overtime on short notice, and nonstandard hours. And many low-income workers are forced to work two jobs to get by. When we look at dual-earner couples, the workload becomes even more daunting. As of 2000, the average dual-earner couple worked a combined 82 hours a week, while almost 15 percent of married couples had a joint workweek of 100 hours or more.

Astonishingly, despite the increased workload of families, and even though 70 percent of American children now live in households where every adult in the home is employed, in the past 20 years the United States has not passed any major federal initiative to help workers accommodate their family and work demands. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 guaranteed covered workers up to 12 weeks unpaid leave after a child's birth or adoption or in case of a family illness. Although only about half the total work force was eligible, it seemed a promising start. But aside from the belated requirement of the new Affordable Care Act that nursing mothers be given a private space at work to pump breast milk, the F.M.L.A. turned out to be the inadequate end.

Meanwhile, since 1990 other nations with comparable resources have implemented a comprehensive agenda of "work-family reconciliation" acts. As a result, when the United States' work-family policies are compared with those of countries at similar levels of economic and political development, the United States **comes in dead last**.

Out of nearly 200 countries studied by Jody Heymann, dean of the school of public health at the University of California, Los Angeles, and her team of researchers for their new book, "Children's Chances," 180 now offer guaranteed paid leave to new mothers, and 81 offer paid leave to fathers. They found that 175 mandate paid annual leave for workers, and 162 limit the maximum length of the workweek. The United States offers none of these protections.

A 1997 European Union directive prohibits employers from paying part-time workers lower hourly rates than full-time workers, excluding them from pension plans or limiting paid leaves to full-time workers. By contrast, American workers who reduce hours for family reasons typically lose their benefits and take an hourly wage cut.

Is it any surprise that American workers express higher levels of work-family conflict than workers

in any of our European counterparts? Or that women's labor-force participation has been overtaken? In 1990, the United States ranked sixth in female labor participation among 22 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which is made up of most of the globe's wealthier countries. By 2010, according to an economic research paper by Cornell researchers Francine Blau and Lawrence Kahn, released last month, we had **fallen to 17th place**, with about 30 percent of that decline a direct result of our failure to keep pace with other countries' family-friendly work policies. American women have not abandoned the desire to combine work and family. Far from it. According to the Pew Research Center, in 1997, 56 percent of women ages 18 to 34 and 26 percent of middle-aged and older women said that, in addition to having a family, being successful in a high-paying career or profession was "very important" or "one of the most important things" in their lives. By 2011, fully **two-thirds of the younger women** and 42 percent of the older ones expressed that sentiment.

Nor have men given up the ideal of gender equity. A **2011 study by the Center for Work and Family** at Boston College found that 65 percent of the fathers they interviewed felt that mothers and fathers should provide equal amounts of caregiving for their children. And in a **2010 Pew poll**, 72 percent of both women and men between 18 and 29 agreed that the best marriage is one in which husband and wife both work and both take care of the house.

BUT when people are caught between the hard place of bad working conditions and the rock wall of politicians' resistance to family-friendly reforms, it is hard to live up to such aspirations. The Boston College study found that only 30 percent of the fathers who wanted to share child care equally with their wives actually did so, a gap that helps explain why American men today report higher levels of work-family conflict than women. Under the circumstances, how likely is it that the young adults surveyed by Pew will meet their goal of sharing breadwinning and caregiving?

The answer is suggested by the findings of the New York University sociologist Kathleen Gerson in the interviews she did for her 2010 book, "The Unfinished Revolution: Coming of Age in a New Era of Gender, Work, and Family." Eighty percent of the women and 70 percent of the men Ms. Gerson interviewed said they wanted an egalitarian relationship that allowed them to share breadwinning and family care. But when asked what they would do if this was not possible, they described a variety of "fallback" positions. While most of the women wanted to continue paid employment, the majority of men said that if they could not achieve their egalitarian ideal they expected their partner to assume primary responsibility for parenting so they could focus on work.

And that is how it usually works out. When family and work obligations collide, mothers remain much more likely than fathers to cut back or drop out of work. But unlike the situation in the 1960s, this is not because most people believe this is the preferable order of things. Rather, it is often a reasonable response to the fact that our political and economic institutions lag way behind our personal ideals.

Women are still paid less than men at every educational level and in every job category. They are less likely than men to hold jobs that offer flexibility or family-friendly benefits. When they become mothers, they face more scrutiny and prejudice on the job than fathers do.

So, especially when women are married to men who work long hours, it often seems to both partners that they have no choice. Female professionals are twice as likely to quit work as other married mothers when their husbands work 50 hours or more a week and more than three times more likely to quit when their husbands work 60 hours or more.

The sociologist Pamela Stone studied a group of mothers who had made these decisions. Typically, she found, they phrased their decision in terms of a preference. But when they explained their “decision-making process,” it became clear that most had made the “choice” to quit work only as a last resort — when they could not get the flexible hours or part-time work they wanted, when their husbands would not or could not cut back their hours, and when they began to feel that their employers were hostile to their concerns. Under those conditions, Professor Stone notes, what was really a workplace problem for families became a private problem for women.

This is where the political gets really personal. When people are forced to behave in ways that contradict their ideals, they often undergo what sociologists call a “values stretch” — watering down their original expectations and goals to accommodate the things they have to do to get by. This behavior is especially likely if holding on to the original values would exacerbate tensions in the relationships they depend on.

In their years of helping couples make the transition from partners to parents, the psychologists Philip and Carolyn Cowan have found that tensions increase when a couple backslide into more traditional roles than they originally desired. The woman resents that she is not getting the shared child care she expected and envies her husband’s social networks outside the home. The husband feels hurt that his wife isn’t more grateful for the sacrifices he is making by working more hours so she can stay home. When you can’t change what’s bothering you, one typical response is to convince yourself that it doesn’t actually bother you. So couples often create a family myth about why they made these choices, why it has turned out for the best, and why they are still equal in their hearts even if they are not sharing the kind of life they first envisioned.

Under present conditions, the intense consciousness raising about the “rightness” of personal choices that worked so well in the early days of the women’s movement will end up escalating the divisive finger-pointing that stands in the way of political reform.

Our goal should be to develop work-life policies that enable people to put their gender values into practice. So let’s stop arguing about the hard choices women make and help more women and men avoid such hard choices. To do that, we must stop seeing work-family policy as a women’s issue and start seeing it as a human rights issue that affects parents, children, partners, singles and

elders. Feminists should certainly support this campaign. But they don't need to own it.

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