

LIBERATING MARRIAGE AND PARTNERSHIP

When contemporary feminist movement was at its peak the institution of marriage was harshly critiqued. The entrance of many heterosexual women into the movement had been sparked by male domination in intimate relationships, particularly long-time marriages where gender inequity was the norm. From the onset the movement challenged the double standard in relationship to sexuality which condemned females who were not virgins or faithful lovers and spouses while allowing men the space to do whatever they desired sexually and have their behavior condoned. The sexual liberation movement strengthened feminist critique of marriage, especially the demand for safe, affordable birth control.

Early on feminist activists focused so much attention on private bonds and domestic relationships because it was in those circumstances that women of all classes and races felt the brunt of male domination, whether from patriarchal parents or spouses. A woman might assertively challenge a sexist male boss or stranger's attempt to dominate her, then go home and submit to her partner. Contemporary feminists, both those heterosexual women who had come from long-time marriages and lesbian allies in struggle, critiqued

marriage as yet another form of sexual slavery. They highlighted the way traditionally sexist bonds led to marriages where elements of intimacy, care, and respect were sacrificed so that men could be on top — could be patriarchs ruling the roost.

Early on many feminist women were pessimistic about men changing. Some heterosexual women decided that they would choose celibacy or lesbianism over seeking after unequal relationships with sexist men. Others saw sexual monogamy with men as reinforcing the idea that the female body was property belonging to the individual male she was bonded with. We chose non-monogamous relationships and often refused to marry. We believed living with a male partner without state-sanctioned marriage within patriarchal society helped men maintain a healthy respect for female autonomy. Feminists advocated demanding an end to sexual slavery and called attention to the prevalence of marital rape while at the same time championing the rights of women to express sexual desire, initiate sexual interaction, and be sexually fulfilled.

There were many heterosexual men who embraced feminist thinking precisely because they were unfulfilled sexually in relationships with partners who were not interested in sex because they had been taught virtuous women were not sexually active. These men were grateful to feminist movement for offering a liberatory sexual paradigm for female mates because it ensured that they would have a more fulfilling sex life. By challenging the notion that a woman's virtue was determined by her sexual practice feminist thinkers not only took away the stigma attached to not being a virgin; they placed female sexual well-being on a equal par with that of men. Urging women to no longer pretend that they were sexually fulfilled when this was not the case, feminist movement threatened to expose male sexual shortcomings.

To defuse this threat sexist men continually insisted that most feminists were lesbians or that all any feminist woman needed was "a good fuck" to put her back in her place. In actuality feminist rebellion exposed the fact that many women were not having satisfying sex with men in patriarchal relationships. In relationship to intimate bonds most men were more willing to embrace feminist changes in female sexuality which led women to be more sexually active than those changes which demanded of men a change in their sexual behavior. The absence of sexual foreplay was a much discussed issue when feminist agendas first focused on heterosexuality. Straight women were tired of male sexual coercion and lack of concern with female pleasure. Feminist focus on sexual pleasure gave women the language to critique and challenge male sexual behavior.

When it came to sexual freedom women made great strides. The critique of monogamy has been forgotten as the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases has made it more difficult for females to choose sexual promiscuity. The prevalence of life-threatening diseases like AIDS, which tend to be more easily transmitted male to female, in a patriarchal culture where men are encouraged to lie to women, have made it harder for heterosexual women to choose a variety of partners. Clearly, when the emphasis is on monogamy in heterosexual bonds within patriarchy it is often harder for couples to break with sexist paradigms. Concurrently within patriarchy many individual feminist women found that non-monogamous relationships often simply gave men more power while undermining women. While women will freely choose to have sex with a man who is partnered with another woman, men will often show no sexual interest in a woman who is partnered. Or they will continually concede power to the male the woman is partnered with, even going so far as to seek his approval of their involvement. Despite these difficulties, women having the freedom to be non-monogamous,

whether we exercise that freedom or not, continues to disrupt and challenge the notion that the female body belongs to men. Like all the positive changes produced by feminist critique of sexist notions of sexual pleasure it has helped create a world where women and men can have more satisfying sexual relationships.

At first it appeared that changes in the nature of sexual bonds would lead to other changes in domestic relationships, that men would also do an equal share of household chores and child care. Nowadays so many males acknowledge that they should do household chores, whether they actually do them or not, that young women see no need to make sharing chores an issue; they just accept this as a norm. Of course the reality is that it has never become the norm, that for the most part women still do most of the housework and child care. Overall men were more willing to accept and affirm equality in the bedroom than to accept equality around housework and child care. Not surprisingly, as individual women gained in class power many women deal with inequity by hiring caretakers to do the tasks neither they nor male partners want to perform. Yet when a heterosexual couple pays help to do the tasks sexist thinking defines as "female" it is usually the woman who employs the help and oversees this work.

More than any factor the feminist critique of mothering as the sole satisfying purpose of a woman's life changed the nature of marriage and long-time partnerships. Once a woman's worth was no longer determined by whether or not she birthed and raised children it was possible for a two-career couple who wanted to remain childless to envision a peer marriage — a relationship between equals. The absence of children made it easier to be peers simply because the way in which patriarchal society automatically assumes certain tasks will be done by mothers almost always makes it harder for women to achieve gender equity around child care. For example: it is

very telling that in the wake of feminist movement the patriarchal medical establishment which had previously downplayed breast-feeding suddenly began to be not only positive about breast-feeding, but insistent. This is just one aspect of child-rearing that automatically places more responsibility on the birthing female whether she is heterosexual or lesbian. Certainly many women in relationships with males often found that having a newborn baby plummeted their relationships back into more sexist-defined roles. However when couples work hard to maintain equity in all spheres, especially child care, it can be the reality; the key issue, though, is working hard. And most men have not chosen to work hard at child care.

(Positively feminist interventions called attention to the value and importance of male parenting both in regards to the well-being of children and gender equity. When males participate equally in parenting, relationships between women and men are better, whether the two parents are married or live together or separately. Because of feminist movement more men do more parenting than ever before, yet we have not achieved even a semblance of gender equity. And we know that this equal participation makes parenting a more positive and fulfilling experience for all parties involved. Of course the demands of work often create the obstacles to more participation in child care by working parents, especially men. Until we see major changes in the way work is structured timewise, we will not live in a world where life is designed to allow men the time and space to parent. In that world men might be more eager to parent. But until then, many working males who are overtired and underpaid will all too willingly accept a woman doing all the child care, even if she is overtired and underpaid. The world of work within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy has made it harder for women to parent fully. Indeed, this reality is leading women who might choose a career to stay home. Rather than sexist thinking

about male domination becoming the factor which takes women out of the workforce and puts them back in the home, it is the fear that we are raising a society of "parentless" children. Many women find competitive careerism leaves little time for nurturing loving relationships. The fact that no one talks about men leaving work to be full-time parents shows the extent to which sexist thinking about roles prevails. Most people in our society still believe women are better at raising children than men.

To a grave extent women, who on one hand critiqued motherhood but on the other hand also enjoyed the special status and privileges it gave them, especially when it came to parent-child bonding, were not as willing to relinquish pride of place in parenting to men as feminist thinkers hoped. Individual feminist thinkers who critiqued biological determinism in every other area often embraced it when it came to the issue of mothering. They were not able to fully embrace the notion that fathers are just as important as mothers, and can parent just as well. These contradictions, along with the predominance of sexist thinking, have undermined the feminist demand for gender equity when it comes to child care.

Nowadays mass media continually bombards us with the message that marriage has made a comeback. Marriage never went out of fashion. Often when people proclaim that it is making a comeback, what they really mean is that more sexist-defined notions of marriage are "in" again. This fact is troubling to feminist movement because it is just as clear today as it was yesterday that marriages built on a sexist foundation are likely to be deeply troubled and rarely last. Traditionally sexist marriages are more and more in vogue. And while they tend to breed the seeds of misery and dissatisfaction that served as a catalyst for feminist rebellion in domestic relationships, the factor that breaks with tradition is that these bonds are often severed quickly. Folks marry young and divorce young.