

Arguments for Marriage and Motherhood	Arguments Against Marriage and Motherhood
Can be fulfilling	Can be parasitic
Able to uproot patriarchal systems	Can lead to potential abuses of power

Advocating for Marriage and Motherhood

Responding to Frye's claim that "...heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood, which are the institutions which most obviously and individually maintain female accessibility to males, form the core triad of antifeminist ideology."

Whether it's in line at the grocery store, flipping through the television channels, or even planning out one's future, women cannot ignore the blatant expectation and pressures of two life changing events: marriage and motherhood. It's impossible to avoid seeing the magazine headlines advising women on how to be the perfect mother, or hearing the television shows that gawk over wedding dresses. Despite all of these messages pushing marriage and motherhood, Marilyn Frye and Claudia Card push back on these traditional notions. Frye argues that these institutions are anti-feminist, while Card questions the value of the institution of marriage. In a time when women still face daily pressures to be a part of these institutions, these sorts of criticisms and pushbacks provide validation to women who want to choose a different path. But, while recognizing the female oppression that operates within marriage and motherhood, it is also important to note this oppression exists because those institutions exist in a patriarchal and sexist society. If the context for these institutions were to change, so would the oppression.

Marilyn Frye advocates separatism as the best way for women to be freed from shackles of patriarchy. In her essay "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power," Frye writes, "ceasing to be loyal to something or someone is a separation; and ceasing to love" (2). Women engaged in separatism are ceasing to be loyal to feminine norms, what men expect, their children and husbands, and any feminine positions as a caretaker, mother, or wife. Frye claims motherhood and marriage make women most accessible to men. She describes a parasitic effect that happens. Much like when a mother is carrying a fetus that lives parasitically, so too does a man to a woman. Marriage gives men a parasitic access to women the same way motherhood gives a fetus access. Card criticizes the institution of marriage, identifying four main issues. The first is that there are legal benefits to married couples, adding incentives to those who choose to be married. The second is that, even though divorce is permitted, the consequences can be so difficult that some instead choose to remain in a marriage. The third is marriage legally only allows for monogamy in the United States. The fourth problem is marriage gives greater access to one's partner, allowing for a great deal of abuse to take place without protection (8). Yet Card says that people still choose to marry because it is a tradition viewed with glory and grants an

individual status. It is a sign one is an adult. The same assertions can be said regarding motherhood. Frye and Card point out a great deal of issues that exist within the institutions of marriage and motherhood. Mostly they point out how these institutions are legally binding and create a unique access to another person that can be difficult to protect oneself from. Yet they do not acknowledge the benefits that can come from the legal bindings that these institutions entail. Additionally, they look at the institutions as corrupted by a patriarchal society and fail to see how they could operate outside of sexism.

One of the main claims against the institution of marriage is the access it gives one to his or her partner. Frye describes the access men are given to women as parasitic. Card points to the way that such access can be detrimental to women, particularly in attempts for partners to separate or in cases of abuse. These are undoubtedly the experiences of too many women. But one must try to imagine what marriage would look like operating outside of a sexist, patriarchal society. So much of the oppression within marriage comes from women having already been determined to be a second-class citizens. Women often are transferred from being considered property of their fathers to property of their husbands. From the beginning, women were always property. Though women are no longer legally marked as property of their husbands, there are still consequences in marriage today of these former legal boundaries. There often exists an expectation for women to cook, clean, and be sexually available for their husbands, often on top of working a job outside of the home. This idea is even reflected in forms of media and marketing. In cleaning commercials, women are predominately the users of the product. In cooking magazines, women are primarily featured in articles and on the covers.

But this isn't the pervasive norm in all homes. In fact, this mindset is starting to dwindle. There are marriages today that strive to operate as much outside of the patriarchy as possible. Husbands and wives who embrace feminism are likely to be willing to not only share the burden of work, but to perceive each other as equals. When a marriage achieves this, the legal bindings are less worrisome. In fact, the legal invasiveness of the state's incentives and benefits could even become necessary. For example, a woman who may work full time while her husband stays at home with their children would want to ensure her husband has access to healthcare. Without working a full-time salaried job, he has no way of accessing benefits other than through his wife. When a couple perceives each other as equal, there is no longer an expectation for one person to fulfill only the roles traditionally assigned to their gender, especially against one's desires. The ability to perceive one's partner as equal, which leads to a reasonable motive for the State to intertwine legal benefits, all rests upon a deeper level of trust, love, and care for one's partner that will be discussed later.

Regarding the institution of motherhood, Frye and Card have similar perspectives here as they do to marriage. Yet there are women who choose to become mothers out of their own desires. If a single mother adopts a young child and enters into the institution of motherhood, it would seem odd to say she oppressed herself.

While she is certainly tied to a person, she does so out of her own desire. Frye claims motherhood is a part of “the core triad of antifeminist ideology” (7), but an essence of feminist ideology is to allow women to be whom and what they want to be without the restrictive boxes that come with them. Frye’s assertion that motherhood is antifeminist is an antifeminist statement to make. Motherhood is difficult. It’s inconvenient. It’s even annoying sometimes. But there are women, some married and some not, who want to have children and believe they will find a sense of fulfillment in that.

There is something similar that must be done within the context of motherhood that is done within the context of a marriage to make it separate it from an oppressive patriarchy. If a child is being raised by two partners, particularly a husband and wife, intentional decisions need to be made to raise children outside of the set of norms and expectations that are set on both the child and the mother. Intentionally entering motherhood knowing how one will balance being a parent with their partner can be the difference between oppression and not. If a woman believes there are particular roles she must do but has no desire to do, she will experience a great amount of oppression from motherhood. For example, if a mother believes she must stay at home to care for her children while her husband works, but she wishes to work, she will experience a degree of oppression by feeling subservient to her husband. But if she and her husband are intentional about having an egalitarian relationship, she may decide that being a stay at home mother is not best for her. Daycare may be best for her children, or even having her husband act as the stay at home parent. Whatever the decision may be, it’s the ability to choose one’s role because they want to do it, not because they have to do it, which differentiates if the institution is oppressive.

Despite all of the reasons to be or not to be married or a mother, Frye and Card miss an important element central to all of these institutions. Care and love for a person are the primary driving factors towards being a part of marriage and motherhood. Despite the difficulties, there are self-proclaimed feminists who willingly and excitedly decide to take part in these roles as wife and mother. It is not because they are seeking to be antifeminist or shower themselves in more oppression. It is because there is something that makes these institutions worth being a part of, despite the hardships they entail. Card gives the reasons for marriage as tradition, status, and having been heavily romanticized (9). She’s not completely wrong. These are the case in some relationships. But ultimately, the institutions of marriage and motherhood are not self-seeking. They require intense self-sacrifice, love, compassion, and work. For one to be in a marriage or to experience motherhood as not oppressive, it requires a great deal of intentionality from every party.

It’s a lofty feat to hope that the institutions of marriage and motherhood will operate absent of oppression within the context of a sexist and patriarchal society. Patriarchy affects everything it touches, and these two significant building blocks of a society are unlikely to go untouched. But when women and

men are intentional about their relationships, it is possible to escape or minimize the oppression that takes place. Aiming to have an egalitarian relationship both in marriage and in parenthood requires an immense amount of work and reevaluation to succeed. But it is not impossible. While Frye and Card raise important points about the difficulties of marriage and motherhood, these points only stand when they are tainted by sexism and patriarchy. They are not universal. Intentionally working to eliminate these from relationships works to not only purify the institutions, but also, if enough feminists make the choice to make their relationships this way, has the potential to turn patriarchy on its head.



Figure 1: Bride on Wedding Day