



CLARE BOOTHE LUCE  
POLICY INSTITUTE

Preparing and Promoting Conservative Women Leaders

No. 10-1 • 2010

# policy *express*

How the once noble cause of feminism has been derailed and why mainstream women have to put it back on track.

## Take Back Feminism

### About the Author

Christina Hoff Sommers is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. She has written and edited several books including *The Science on Women and Science*, *Who Stole Feminism?*, and *The War Against Boys*.

She has lectured and debated on more than 100 college campuses.



Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute  
112 Elden Street, Suite P  
Herndon, Virginia 20170  
P (888) 891-4288 • F (703) 318-8867  
[www.cblpi.org](http://www.cblpi.org)

By Christina Hoff Sommers

When asked, “Are you a feminist?,” most American women say no. Feminist activists blame the media for feminism’s poor image, but I believe the activists themselves have turned the women’s movement into a caricature. Within living memory, the American feminist movement was a vibrant, broad-based vehicle for social equality that had achieved momentous victories and enjoyed richly deserved prestige for its valor and success.

But today the movement has been taken over by aggrieved eccentrics. Marching under the banner of feminism, the current activists are fighting a gender war that few women support or understand. The potential for harm is enormous. Mainstream women are going to have to rescue feminism from the feminists.

We badly need a responsible, reality-based women’s movement. Women in many parts of the developing world are still struggling for their basic rights. The classical style of feminism that made American women among the most liberated in the world offers a tried-and-true road map to emancipation. Even in the West, there are still unresolved equity issues.

Who needs feminism? We do. The world does. But not the feminism that prevails in the typical college “womyn’s center.”

### Two Paths to Freedom

To understand what went wrong and how it might be set right, we need briefly to visit feminism in its glory days. Historically, there have been two major schools of thought within the women’s movement: *egalitarian feminism* and *social feminism*.

Egalitarian feminists were progressives—some would say radicals. They held that men and women, although socialized to different roles, are identical in their essential natures. By appealing to principles of social justice and universal rights, egalitarians sought to liberate women from the private sphere of the home—into the public spheres of politics, business, and work.

The social feminists, by contrast, were traditionalist and family-centered. They embraced rather than scorned women’s roles as mothers or caregivers—and promoted women’s rights by redefining and strengthening those roles.

Social feminists argued that an empowered femininity could be a force for good in the world and they made common cause with the egalitarians in promoting women’s education, women’s suffrage, and women’s participation in the culture and politics. Historically, both schools played critical roles in women’s emancipation.

In 18<sup>th</sup> Century England, the two sides were represented by the great egalitarian

feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and the formidable conservative “Blue Stocking” Hannah More. In 19<sup>th</sup> Century America, the egalitarians were led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and the traditional social feminists by Frances Willard.

Now it is much more likely that you have heard of Stanton and Anthony than Willard, who has been effectively air-brushed out of the history of feminism. It is worth taking a moment to consider her accomplishments and the way she is now regarded. For she may hold the key to a feminist renaissance.

Moviemaker Ken Burns followed his award-winning *The Civil War* with a 1999 film about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and their struggle to win the vote for American women. In one sequence the narrator mentions that, in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Anthony forged coalitions with some conservative mainstream groups.

The mood darkens and Women’s Studies Professor Sally Roesch Wagner appears on the screen. Wagner informs viewers that Anthony was so determined to win the vote that she established alliances with pro-suffrage women who were “enemies of freedom in every other way—Frances Willard is a case in point.” The camera then shows a photo of a menacing-looking Willard.

One would never imagine from Burns’s film that Frances Willard (1839-1898) was one of the most beloved and respected women of 19<sup>th</sup> Century America. Because of her prodigious good works and kindly nature, Willard was often called “Saint Frances of American Womanhood.” It was Willard who brought mainstream women into the suffrage movement.

Many historians credit her with doing far more to win the vote for women than any other suffragist. But her fondness for saying things like “Womanliness first—afterwards what you will” was her ticket to oblivion among those in today’s Women’s Studies programs.

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s the suffrage movement was in serious trouble: many women actively organized against it. Stanford historian Carl Degler and others believe that, because the vote was associated with individualism and personal assertiveness, women saw it as both selfish and an

attack on their unique and valued place in the family. If the American women’s movement was going to move forward, the suffrage movement needed new arguments and new ways of thinking that were more respectful and protective of women’s role. Frances Willard showed the way.

Willard served as president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union from 1879 until her death in 1898. With the vote, said Willard, women could greatly increase their civilizing and humane influence on society. With the vote, they could protect the homes they dearly loved. Indeed, Willard referred to the vote as “the home protection ballot.” Women were moved by her arguments; men were disarmed. Cady Stanton was leery of the association with Willard: the less radical Anthony relished it. Willard and her followers began to bring the suffrage movement something the egalitarians were unable to accomplish on their own: electoral victories.

Both the egalitarian and social feminist paths have been indispensable to women’s progress—although social feminism has always enjoyed wider appeal. But as women’s historian Janet Zollinger Giele notes, “History records defeat where one branch failed to recognize the valid arguments of the other.”

### **Mother Nature is not a Feminist**

So where are we now? Following the Second World War, the United States badly needed an egalitarian correction. It arrived in what has come to be known as the Second Wave of feminism. (The Suffrage Movement, culminating in passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, was the First Wave.)

In the 1950s and 1960s, American women were still locked out of many fields and allotted second-class status in education, in the workplace, and before the law. Those who preferred paths other than wife and mother, or who found the stereotypes of femininity stultifying, were trapped.

Egalitarian feminists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem led the way and urged American women to live “not at the mercy of the world, but as builder and designer of that world.” Women listened. By the 1980s, American women were well

*“Womanliness first —  
afterwards what you will”*

on their way to enjoying freedoms and opportunities far beyond those of any women in history.

But mainstream American women never fully embraced the egalitarian program of Friedan and Steinem and other leaders of the Second Wave. Rather, they adopted a compromise between the egalitarian and social traditions.

This compromise was once eloquently (and presciently) described by Clare Boothe Luce who in her heyday in the 1940s was a popular playwright and a member of the United States Congress. She wrote these words about women at a time when feminism's Second Wave was still more than twenty years away. Her views are not celebrated during women's history month, but they capture the style of feminism that seems to resonate with women everywhere:

*It is time to leave the question of the role of women in society up to Mother Nature—a difficult lady to fool. You have only to give women the same opportunities as men, and you will soon find out what is or is not in their nature. What is in women's nature to do they will do, and you won't be able to stop them. But you will also find, and so will they, that what is not in their nature, even if they are given every opportunity, they will not do, and you won't be able to make them do it.*

Camille Paglia, the brilliant literary critic and dissident feminist, once told me she found Luce's words awe-inspiring. So do I. Luce takes the best of both egalitarian and social feminism. She is careful to say that women's nature can only be made known in conditions of freedom and opportunity. But, she does not expect that, with equal opportunity, women will turn out to be interchangeable with men.

By the end of the 20th Century, this moderate, eclectic style of feminism had become the lived philosophy of most American women—and men, too. Very few Americans want to see women forced into rigid gender roles—but neither do they wish to see gender differences abolished. For this style of Clare Boothe Luce feminism (call it “*equity feminism*”) the ideal is equality of opportunity, not equality of results.

When the 2007 Pew Research Center asked working mothers and fathers “What would be the ideal situation for you—working full time, part-time, or not at all outside the home?,” a majority of mothers preferred part-time (50%) and nearly a third (29%) preferred not to work at all. Among fathers, 72% preferred to work full-time. For equity feminists, these are expected and fully acceptable consequences of freedom.

But let's be very clear about what these group comparisons mean—because people often get confused and cry “Sexism!” When we say, men tend to do this, and women that—we are dealing in averages, not absolutes. There is a sizable percentage of women who will make the same decisions as a man.

To say that most mothers prefer not to work full-time—is not to say that no mothers want full-time jobs. Many mothers do. As many as one in five. I am one such mother. But we need to recognize and respect the desires of those who take different paths in their pursuit of happiness.

### The Sisterhood

The women who built the college Women's Studies departments and who lead the contemporary organized women's movement took a different path. For the most part, they regarded women's traditional domestic roles as obstacles to the realization of their true natures rather than as expressions of their natures. Most are radical egalitarians, determined to create a new society in which men and women are liberated from the stereotypes of gender.

A classic expression of this worldview is Hunter College psychologist Virginia Valian's *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women* (1999). “Egalitarian parents can bring up their children so that both boys and girls play with dolls and trucks.” Valian concludes, “From the standpoint of equality, nothing is more important.”

Others, far fewer in number but even more other-worldly, have gone beyond mere egalitarianism to an Amazonian “gynocentric” feminism that proclaims women the superior sex who will have to save the world from the predations of a toxic masculinity.

Housed in Women's Studies departments, law schools, research institutes, and advocacy centers, these two groups have built a powerful fortress of their own. They tolerate one another but view

*Clare Boothe Luce captured the style of feminism that resonates with women*

most outside criticism as “backlash” or “intellectual harassment.” Their convictions are unfalsifiable, no amount of evidence can change their minds. For them, the fact that vast numbers of women continue to give children and family priority over careers, and even profess themselves to be happy with that circumstance, is proof that women are still captive to a repressive and tenacious “gender system.”

Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge are two Women’s Studies professors who openly defected. In their revealing book, *Professing Feminism: Education and Indoctrination in Women’s Studies* (2001), they show how feminist classrooms use propaganda to transform idealistic female students into “relentless grievance collectors.”

Pick up a Women’s Studies textbook, visit a college women’s center, look at the websites of leading feminist organizations, and you will find elaborate theories about the “male hegemony.” Students learn that we inhabit an oppressive “patriarchal” society where women are robbed of their self-esteem, “conditioned” to accept subordinate roles, “channeled” into low-paying fields, and cheated out of almost a quarter of their income.

These teachings bear no relation to reality; they do nothing to help women solve the real problems they confront, and they are disrespectful and patronizing to women. But the false claims have been repeated so many times they have taken on the aura of truth.

### Why it Matters

Some will say, who cares? So what if a lot of feminist professors believe and say silly things? First of all, millions of college students have been burdened by their divisive and sometimes poisonous teachings. And many journalists and politicians take their ideas seriously.

Consider the influence of the National Council for Research on Women (NCRW). This is a network of 112 women’s research and policy centers. Members include the Wellesley Center for Research on Women, Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute, and the Stanford Institute for Gender Research.

The NCRW promotes legions of radical scholars, lawyers, and activists working against the “deeply

ingrained gendering” of American life. Obstacles holding women back were removed several decades ago—and discrimination in the workplace or in education is against the law. So these groups now specialize in removing “invisible barriers.”

Why, ask the NCRW feminists, should there be so many more men in math and engineering than women? What explains the over-representation of men on corporate boards and prestigious Sunday morning news programs? Why should men be getting most of the patents and garnering the major literary awards? And, most urgently, why do so many women cooperate by giving priority to home and family over career?

To such questions the NCRW researchers have boilerplate answers. Women are being held back by “unconscious bias,” “hostile climates,” and “internalized oppression.” Other more innocent explanations—such as the possibility that the sexes, taken as groups, are different—are ruled out of bounds.

The members of the NCRW have volumes of their own research to “prove” ubiquitous—albeit invisible—discrimination and they have hundreds of initiatives to address it. It can be career diminishing for a skeptical scholar to openly criticize their agenda. So, they flourish and grow.

Here is a sample of some dubious achievements of the NCRW groups and their sister organizations:

- ▶ The celebrated Title IX equity law began as an admirable equal-opportunity requirement. Because of pressure from the NCRW groups such as the National Women’s Law Center and the American Association of University Women, Title IX has evolved into a gender quota regime that is blind to empirical differences in overall men’s and women’s interests in sports. Since football is a money generating male-only sport with large rosters, Title IX quotas have decimated men’s wrestling, swimming, diving, and gymnastic teams. We did not need to do that in order to achieve the great success of women’s collegiate sports.
- ▶ Lobbying by the NCRW and feminist scholars persuaded the National Science Foundation to invest millions of dollars

*Millions of college students  
have been burdened by  
feminist professors’ divisive and  
sometimes poisonous teachings*

in a program called ADVANCE. For the past decade it has sponsored “cultural transformation” programs that challenge the “manliness of the scientific enterprise” with its obsessive single-mindedness, competitiveness, and disregard of family life. The nation’s leading math, physics, engineering, and computer technology departments are now under NSF pressure to adopt gender quotas, and to rein in their competitive, hard-driven, meritocratic culture—a predominantly “male culture” that has made American science the mightiest in the world.

- ▶ Last year, NCRW groups joined other major women’s organizations to demand a “gender-balanced” stimulus bill. President Obama, alarmed by the massive losses in the manufacturing and construction sectors, initially spoke of a “shovel ready” stimulus bill to strengthen these devastated industries. Women’s groups were appalled and sent word that “we don’t want this stimulus package to just create jobs for burly men.” A flood of petitions, faxes, e-mails, and phone calls followed. More than one thousand feminist historians signed a letter of protest to the President: “We need to rebuild not only steel bridges but also human bridges.”

The President did what

most deans and college presidents do when confronted by a chorus of female complaint: he ran for cover. He directed his chief economists Christina Romer and Jared Bernstein to develop a gender-fair budget.

A few weeks later they came out with the “Job Impact of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan,” which explicitly noted that “the total number of created jobs likely to go to women is roughly 42 percent.” Lest anyone miss the point, they added that since men lost 80 percent of the jobs in the recession, the stimulus package now “skews job creation somewhat towards women.”

The women’s groups were electrified by their victory. But a feminist establishment that celebrates these sorts of triumphs over men does not represent the interests of many women. Those men are fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, and friends; if they are in serious trouble, so are the women who care about them and in many cases depend on them.

But the NCRW and its sister organizations see the world differently. For them, life is a zero-sum struggle between men and women—and their job is to side with the women.

### Feminism for the New Century

It doesn’t have to be this way. Over the years, I have lectured on more than 100 college campuses where I meet both conservative and radical students. The former invite me; the latter come to jeer and wrangle—but as a rule, we all part friends. The feminist professors almost never attend. Why should they lend credibility to a critic who is by definition a crank? It’s the students and me.

To my surprise, I find that many of the younger feminist activist students welcome the chance to debate. Most can be reasoned with and seem fully capable of allying themselves with moderate and conservative women to work for a common purpose.

My advice to today’s college women: take back feminism now. Make it inclusive, fair, and reality-based. Make the movement attractive again to the majority of American women

who want their rights but do not wish to be liberated from the traditions of femininity.

We can then take on the great cause that awaits us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: helping the women who have yet to find the liberty that Western women have won for themselves—and that women everywhere deserve.



*The 21st Century cause —  
helping those women  
who have yet to  
find the liberty  
that Western women  
have won for themselves*