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# Women's Choices and the Future of Feminism

## Introduction: Selling Out? Solidarity and Choice in the American Feminist Movement

Jennet Kirkpatrick

This symposium examines an emergent orientation within the American feminist movement called “choice feminism.” Choice feminists are primarily concerned with increasing the number of choices open to women and with decreasing judgments about the choices that individual women make. Choice feminists are best known for their argument that a woman who leaves the remunerated labor market to care for her children is a feminist in good standing; she makes a feminist decision. While media coverage of choice feminism has been extensive, political scientists have been comparatively quiet. In this symposium, four political scientists analyze and evaluate choice feminism, revealing their disagreement about the validity of the choice feminist position and about the meaning of choice feminism for movement politics, political judgment, and liberal political theory.

In this so-called post-feminist age, American women are saying some startling things. Listen, for instance, to how one accomplished, well-credentialed woman who stepped out of the remunerated workforce to raise her children described her decision. “I think some of us are swinging to a place where we can enjoy, and can admit to enjoy, the stereotypical role of female/mother/caregiver. . . . Women today, if we think about feminism at all, see it as a battle fought for ‘the choice.’ For us, the freedom to choose work if we want to is the feminist strain in our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

Having more choices is usually better than fewer. And it is certainly a feminist victory that American women today have more options than they did fifty years ago. But is feminism the “freedom to choose work if we want to”? Is feminism now the freedom to choose to be a stereotype? An emergent position within American feminism dubbed “choice feminism” suggests that the answer to these questions is *yes*. For choice feminists, a woman who decides to

leave the remunerated workforce to raise children—who decides to “opt-out”—makes an empowering, feminist decision about the direction of her life. Moreover, choice feminists see the availability of the opt-out option as evidence of the triumph of the feminist movement. Feminists have earned the right to leave high-pressure careers; they are now empowered enough to act in traditionally feminine ways. The rhetoric of choice feminism has spread well beyond debates about opting out, as has the idea that feminists can do almost anything so long as the choice is theirs. Breast enhancement surgery? High heels and short skirts? Face lift? Choice feminism sees each as a legitimate, feminist option. As one commentator puts it, choice feminists tend to think “we *earned* the right to look at *Playboy*; we were *empowered* enough to get Brazilian bikini waxes. Women had come so far . . . we no longer needed to worry about objectification or misogyny.”<sup>2</sup>

Pitched as the latest volley in the “mommy wars,” media coverage of choice feminism has been extensive. It has been covered by CBS on “60 Minutes” and the “Evening News,” by Fox News, and by ABC’s “Good Morning America.” A slew of articles, editorials, and op-eds have appeared as well in a range of outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The American Prospect*, *Newsweek*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Bitch: A Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, and *Playboy Magazine*. The new post-feminist housewife is even the subject of reality television, with the “Real Housewives of Orange County” franchise branching out to New York, New Jersey, and Atlanta, not to mention “Wife Swap” and the new “The Ex-Wives Club.”

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With the selection of Sarah Palin as the Republican Party's nominee for vice president in 2008, the media focused its klieg lights once again on the issue of women's choices, feminism, work, and the family. Palin describes herself as a feminist, but is she? Some feminist commentators have suggested that her choice to "strap the baby on your back and forge the raging river" betrays feminist commitments to family.<sup>3</sup> Others have praised Palin's choices, seeing her as an example of a muscular, individualistic type of feminism in which exceptional women can and should take the lead. As one commentator noted, Palin reverses "the old saw that behind every man is a great woman: Here, the great woman is out in front and the great man provides the support. Isn't that real feminism?"<sup>4</sup>

What is missing in the froth of this media coverage is critical analysis by feminist scholars about the significance of choice feminism for political theory and political science. This symposium fills this gap by initiating discussion within political science about freedom and solidarity, the liberal framework of choice, and movement politics. Three political scientists whose work focuses on feminist theory and the feminist movement—Micheale L. Ferguson, R. Claire Snyder-Hall, and Lori J. Marso—have taken up this task. Nancy J. Hirschmann closes the symposium by commenting on these three articles and on choice feminism in general. To introduce the symposium, I provide a brief summary of choice feminism, a synopsis of the feminist counter argument, and an overview of some pertinent issues raised by this symposium for political science and political theory.

### Choices, Choices Everywhere: Choice Feminism

Choice feminism is best described as an emergent disposition within the feminist movement that is most closely aligned with libertarianism. Choice feminism is an ethical and political way of looking at the world, an approach to feminist issues. It is not an organized faction within the feminist movement. To date, choice feminism does not have either a definitive manifesto that outlines its goals and ideals or an identifiable leader. Moreover, choice feminists are a politically motley group. They are not aligned with any political party but rather span the political spectrum. As is befitting its emphasis on individual action and choice, choice feminism is largely an unorganized approach that has developed in the absence of leadership or orchestration.

Though it lacks for organization, choice feminism is a cohesive position. What bind choice feminists together are their ideals and commitments, four of which are particularly key. First, choice feminists give ethical primacy to individual women. As choice feminists see it, the individual woman knows her situation best; she is the only one who truly understands her particular personal history, motivations, or interests. Thus, an individual woman is

the only one endowed with the complete information to make a decision about the course or direction of her life. Second, choice feminists believe that a woman's individual liberty can only be legitimately constrained if she harms another. Essentially reconfiguring J. S. Mill's harm principle, choice feminists reject the notion that a woman's choice can be controlled because she will harm herself. As advocates of choice feminism see it, it is illegitimate to argue that a woman would be happier, wiser, or better off if she were to choose a different course of action. Although not absolute, a woman's independence over her own life is far reaching. Third, choice feminists tend to see the feminist movement in progressive and irreversible terms. Feminism moves forward, not backward. For some, feminism has reached its end point; we are in a post-feminist age. Other choice feminists disagree. Either way however, choice feminists tend to see second-wave feminist victories as an unalterable part of their environment. For them, "feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—it's simply in the water."<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, choice feminists believe that any mistakes that a feminist might make are less pernicious than the restraint of others on her decision-making. Restraint on one's options is the problem. Choice feminists generally do not focus their ire on legal restraints issued by the state, but rather on the tsk-tsking of other feminists. No feminist, they argue, should be shamed, marginalized, or even judged for her spontaneous, highly personal decisions. Because no one else truly knows her situation, no one else is fit to judge her or her decisions. As two prominent choice feminists put it, older feminists "have to stop treating us like daughters. You don't have the authority to treat us like babies or acolytes who need to be molded."<sup>6</sup> Choice feminists strive to get away from feminist disapproval and castigation, from what Rebecca Walker has called "a feminist ghetto" of guilt and second-guessing.<sup>7</sup>

In combination, these four ideals have produced a vision of feminism that is inclusive, tolerant, and accepting. Choice feminists are pushing the boundaries of feminism outward—making "feminist" describe an ever-widening array of actions—at the same time they are shutting down judgments about what feminism is. In *The Beauty Myth* for instance, Naomi Wolf opens the door for feminists to diet, have plastic surgery, and "make their clothing and faces and bodies into works of art," all in the name of choice.<sup>8</sup> Jan Breslauer echoes this laissez-aller approach—on the pages of *Playboy* no less—with her argument that breast enhancement surgery can be a feminist act. As Breslauer sees it, a woman's choice to alter her body is "a sign that women have gained power" and she notes that "even old-school feminists, after all, would go to the mat for a woman's right to do what she wants with her body." Breslauer urges feminists to embrace a more expansive notion of feminist liberty within the parameters of a sexist society. "Of course our society is still sexist," she writes. "But

that's not going to change any time soon. Here's the choice: you can rail against an imperfect world, or go get yourself a great pair of bazongas. Which I did."<sup>9</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha brings an expansive, live-and-let-live approach to feminist activism. After 9/11, she writes, "the choice was: Either do formulaic activism that doesn't keep you safe and is not imagined with your needs in mind, or stay at home and do whatever you want." Piepzna-Samarasinha tended to choose the latter, concluding "everything I did to keep myself alive—from holding down a job to painting my toenails to building and using my altar to cooking up big pots of sweet potato curry before we watched *The Siege* (with irony)—I decided to count as activism." What feminists need, she argues, are more choices. They need to "claim a million different ways to fight."<sup>10</sup>

### **From the Frida Kahlo Problem to Reproductive Backmail: Feminist Responses to Choice Feminism**

The problem of calling everything feminist, critics have pointed out, is that it threatens to expunge the term of meaning. If everything is feminist, then perhaps nothing is. As the most public and vocal critic of choice feminism, Linda Hirshman has attempted to reign the meaning of feminism in, arguing that a woman who leaves the remunerated labor market to care for children is not a feminist. Indeed, according to Hirshman, her decision may be *anti-feminist*. Hirshman argues, in particular, that feminists who opt-out of high-powered careers threaten to undermine the substantial legal and social changes established by second-wave feminists in the latter half of the twentieth century. These women are selling out. And, as Hirshman sees it, a crisis of the feminist commons may be the result. Choice feminism may unwittingly nudge American society back to a time when it was lawful in many places to refuse to hire a pregnant woman (1978), it was legal to organize "Help wanted" advertisements according to gender (1972), and it was legally permissible to classify pay scales according to gender (1962). Hirshman argues that choice feminism may revive a long-standing equation that has been particularly pernicious to women's political, social and professional advancement: women = babies = unreliable employees.

In laying out her criticism, Hirshman takes issue with the four main arguments of choice feminism. First, Hirshman disputes the choice feminist claim that individual women are the best decision-makers. According to Hirshman, young feminists are particularly prone to mistakes, especially when they make decisions in isolation from older feminists. Second—and most provocatively for liberal theorists—Hirshman argues that women who opt out of the labor market *are* inflicting a serious harm and thus their choice can be legitimately criticized. The harmed

party is not an individual, however; it is the feminist movement. Hirshman breaks with the individualistic approach of choice feminism and urges feminists to take account of harms to the group to which they are claiming membership. Third, Hirshman argues that choice feminists are mistaken when they assume that the accomplishments of the feminist movement are irreversible. While choice feminists see feminism as an ever-present element of their world ("feminism is like fluoride"), Hirshman sees feminism as a series of hard-won victories that must be vigilantly defended.

Fourth, Hirshman objects to choice feminists' non-judgmental, free-to-be-you-and-me approach, seeing it as both detrimental to the feminist movement and unfeasible given human nature. Hirshman argues that some choices are morally significant because they reveal what the individual values, what she sees as the good. Thus, when a careerist turned stay-at-home mother says that she is "putting her children and family first," she discloses that she values family foremost. Her choice is a sign of her moral good. It is also likely her decision will be evaluated and critiqued by others. We are, Hirshman argues, always judging, and what's more, we are right to do so. Choice "or even its pumped-up cousin 'personal choice,'" Hirshman writes, "does not remove decisions to a special realm where they cannot be judged." There is no such "morality-free" space where women can excuse themselves from the criticism of other feminists. "When feminism returns to an analysis of the value of the choices women make, it will have the advantage of doing what everyone is doing all along, every time they enter the voting booth, every time they gossip, and every time they decide a legal case: making moral decisions about their lives and the lives of their society."<sup>11</sup> To judge, Hirshman suggests, is to be human.

What is to be done? As Hirshman sees it, the "opt-out revolution" can be solved by providing young feminists with a list of rules aimed at behavior modification. In college, for instance, young women should avoid the "Frida Kahlo problem"—that is, the dreamy fantasy of a career that is socially meaningful or intellectually fulfilling. They should instead direct themselves toward a well-compensated career.<sup>12</sup> Young women should "marry down," finding a spouse of the same age in a "dependent status, like a starving artist" or an older spouse whose career is largely over.<sup>13</sup> And, instigating what might be called the feminist one-child policy, Hirshman urges young women to limit themselves to one baby. If a spouse fails to do his fair share in the domestic realm, "use reproductive blackmail" or go on a "reproductive strike."<sup>14</sup>

Other feminist critics of choice feminism have focused less on individual responsibility and culpability and more on how policy and social pressure constrain women's decision-making. These critics argue that choice feminism tends to myopically focus on the autonomous



individual rather than on the structures of power that restrain women's freedom. In *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* for instance, Judith Warner draws attention to how the absence of state-sponsored benefits for American women curtail women's choices to leave the remunerated labor market. Unlike French women for instance, most American women make their decision whether to "opt out" without state-subsidized preschools, four months of paid maternity leave, cash grants for a second child, and the option for mothers to have their work positions held for them for up to three years while they care for their children. In the United States, Warner was "shocked by the degree to which everyone—feminist or not—seemed willing to accept the 'choices' given them, even to accept the idea that the narrow paths they'd been forced into living were choices."<sup>15</sup> Pamela Stone's *Opting Out?: Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home* suggests that the American work environment also plays a significant role in the decision of high-powered careerists to become stay-at-home mothers. Stone finds that women's "attempts to maintain their careers on terms other than full-time plus were penalized, not applauded; it was quitting that earned them kudos."<sup>16</sup> The picture that emerges is not of women "choosing" to leave the labor market, but of being encouraged to leave because of inflexibility, sexism, and subtle workplace discrimination against mothers.

## Symposium Overview

The media coverage of choice feminism has focused in large part on the standing of women in American society. Are American women free enough or equal enough that their choices—even their bad choices—are a sign of their empowerment? Have American women come a long way, baby—such a long way, in fact, that they can now devote themselves entirely to their babies? The contributors to this symposium take choice feminism as their focus but, by addressing a fuller range of issues than the media, they speak to three topics that are particularly pertinent to political science and political theory.

### *Movement Politics: Internal Diversity and Difference*

Choice feminism highlights a salient issue for political movements in general: how should political movements address difference and conflict within their ranks? Should movements police their boundaries in the name of cohesion and efficacy or should they adopt a "big tent" approach that emphasizes a tolerant, non-judgmental, and accepting ethos? Like many movements on the political left, the American feminist movement has aspired to be an inclusive group—particularly in terms of race, class, and sexuality—and it has struggled to make a wide range of constituencies feel welcome in it. Success has been varied. Many women of color and proponents of "post-colonial"

and "Third World" feminisms remain alienated from what they see as a predominately white and Eurocentric movement. The challenges of constructing a diverse and open movement have prompted soul-searching questions about the goals and purpose of the movement, as well as the meaning of feminism. What makes a feminist a feminist? How can feminists theorize the feminist "we" at the heart of a diverse and broad movement? Some have suggested that feminists are united by shared policy goals. Others have argued that feminists have a common feminine identity, standpoint, or epistemology. Still other feminists have maintained that there are no prediscursive or "natural" foundations on which to hang feminist identity; there is no feminist subject that precedes the claim to be a feminist.

How can differences among feminists be meaningfully acknowledged while maintaining the solidarity necessary to accomplish the long-term (and wide-ranging) goals of the movement? And, in particular, does choice feminism offer a viable model for addressing internal disagreement? On these questions, the contributors disagree. Snyder-Hall argues that a redeemed version of choice feminism is a legitimate approach to internal diversity. Hirschmann also argues that feminists should adopt a more accepting stance toward a variety of women's choices, while resisting the temptation to label all choices feminist. Ferguson and Marso disagree; they are far more critical of the capacity of choice feminism to unify a feminist movement that is vibrant, effective, and politically engaged.

### *Political Judgment*

As we have seen, choice feminism rejects the notion that others can or should judge an individual woman's personal and spontaneous choice. Choice feminists yearn to escape from the disparaging, castigating gaze of other feminists, and they readily exclaim, "Who are you to judge me?" Choice feminists seem to be most opposed to a feminist demeanor that is judgmental, critical, and even contemptuous. In response, critics like Hirschman have asserted that judgment is an essential component of a moral and political life. We make judgments when we vote, when we serve on a jury, and when we engage in political activism; humans are judging creatures.

Is it possible for feminists to be able to *critically* engage with other feminists without lapsing into the contemptuous *criticism* that choice feminists resist? Can feminists exercise *judgment*, without *judgmental* disdain or contempt? Ferguson addresses this issue by elaborating on why judgment is essential to feminist politics and by explicating the distinction between judgment and what she calls "judgmentalism." Snyder-Hall disagrees, seeing the act of judging as irretrievably caught up in value judgments that divide feminists and weaken the feminist movement. Hirschmann pushes this debate further by distinguishing between feminist and non-feminist decisions

and raising the question as to whether both kinds of decisions should be justified in public.

### *Liberal Theory and Individual Choice*

America has long been called an exceptional nation because of its tenacious intellectual roots in Lockean liberal theory and what C. B. Macpherson called possessive individualism. Setting aside the thorny issue of how well the theory of American exceptionalism accounts for America's varied history, choice feminism reveals that many American women today find the idea of individual choice appealing, as did many "pro-choice" feminists before them. To what extent is the rhetoric of choice compatible with feminism, a social movement dedicated to improving the lives of *all* women? A problem with choice feminism and the language of choice more generally is that it often fails to account for how women's choices are structured by economic inequality. Choice feminists defending opting out have focused attention on a small population of wealthy, highly educated women, and in so doing, they have repeatedly overlooked a pertinent fact: many poor women do not have the choice as to whether to stay at home to care for their children. Concentrating on choice, to the exclusion of all else, has historically done little to address underlying class oppression. As Dorothy Roberts notes, individual liberty "does nothing to dismantle social arrangements that make it impossible for some people to make a choice in the first place." Liberty, she continues, "guards against government intrusion; it does not guarantee social justice."<sup>17</sup>

Is choice feminism irretrievably bound up with a type of liberal individualism that feminism should reject? Marso suggests it is, pointing out that choice feminism tends to erase all sorts of pertinent differences among women—class being just one example—through the language of individual choice and responsibility. Feminists, she argues, should not hide structural differences between women, but rather remain focused on them. In response, Hirschmann argues for a reconsideration of liberal individualism and provocatively introduces the idea of adaptive preferences.

As these three points suggest, choice feminism opens up a range of questions about movement politics and the meaning of fundamental political concepts like freedom, choice, judgment, and solidarity that can expand and enrich political science. We hope that this symposium stimulates further scholarship on how current controversies within the feminist movement are connected to existing topics of study within political science and political theory.

### Notes

- 1 Belkin 2003, 47.
- 2 Levy 2005, 3–4, emphasis original.
- 3 Belkin, 2008, 11.

- 4 Young 2008, 21.
- 5 Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 17.
- 6 Ibid., 233.
- 7 Walker 1995, xxix.
- 8 Wolf 1990, 228.
- 9 Breslauer 1997, 66.
- 10 Piepzna-Samarasinha 2006, 172, 178.
- 11 Hirshman 2006, 26–27.
- 12 Ibid., 46–51.
- 13 Hirshman 2005, 25.
- 14 Hirshman 2006, 62–63.
- 15 Warner 2005, 15.
- 16 Stone 2007, 19.
- 17 Roberts 1997, 294.

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