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1 certainly wouldn’t want your life.” This unsolicited
pronouncement by one author’s stay-at-home mother is
the theme of the following mid-life reflection on femi-
nism. After decades of living and defending the feminist
ideals of the 1970s, over and against the traditional gender
model of our upbringing, we are forced to concede that
our mothers may, indeed, have had better lives.

Underlying the following critique is the recognition
that life proceeds on two levels, the realm of ideals on the
one hand, and realities on the other. Some people invest
time and effort in the pursuit of imagined perfection, for
example, egoless love, world peace, and—significant
here—gender equity.

These quests take place amidst undeniable human
shortcomings, conflicts, and injustices. If things were as
they should be, dedication to ideals would be rewarded
by the actualization of expected benefits. But often dream-
ers find themselves isolated and misunderstood in a soci-
ety that refuses to change. Eventually visions must be as-
sessed in the glare of reality. In this essay, we call attention
to the empirical consequences of dedication to feminist
ideals. We hope, thereby, to move beyond political correc-
tness to an honest dialog about the gap between feminist
promises and social facts.

We have been colleagues at our university for over a
decade. Although from opposite sides of the country, with
dissimilar personalities, and in very different fields (Wil-
son in economics, Kwilecki in religious stud-
ies), we discovered striking similarities
in our lives. As young women, each of
us chose to follow the feminist path
to fulfillment, with parallel results in
professional and personal life. We
cultivated our strengths, self-con-
sciously deviated from traditional female
roles (perfectly enacted by our mothers), demanded eq-
ity and partnership with men, and expected thereby to
attain satisfactions unprecedented for our gender.

Neither of us burned our bras, joined NOW, or spe-
ialized in women’s studies. Rather, our feminism was the
more insidious kind that shapes ambitions. We sought
nothing less than excellence in a male-dominated profes-
sion. The possibility of compromising our objectives for
traditional female satisfactions never occurred to us. It
would be decades before we realized the impact of our
choices.

In our late twenties, we earned our doctorates at presti-
gious universities. Tenured in our thirties, we accumu-
lated a record of publications in reputable journals. We
have performed the full range of university services and
are assessed by students as highly effective teachers. We
have managed mortgages, car loans and retirement
funds—and know how to operate a power drill. From all
appearances, we have actualized the feminist ideals of
self-determination and career accomplishment.

However, as they say, you can’t judge a book by its
cover. Facing fifty, we find ourselves ostracized and disin-
herited by our natal families, approaching old age without
the support of spouses or children, and unrecognized and wounded at
work. If only one of us were in this
boat, she might consider herself un-
lucky.

However, we believe these circum-
stances are the natural, albeit unin-
tended, consequences of feminist self-
cultivation. Just as it is no accident
that career accomplishments followed
from youthful feminist commitments, neither are these
common mid-life disappointments coincidental. Whatever
satisfactions may come from being a self-sufficient, intel-
ligent woman, the other side of the coin is life as a stray fe-
male, scrounging around for scraps of social re-
force.

We will address the discrepancy between the prom-
ises and products of feminism in three areas of life: family,
romance and work.

The family fools
Feminist fantasy. We considered ourselves brave explor-
ers, pushing beyond our homemaker mothers and female
siblings. Any woman, we reasoned, could marry and have
children. We aspired to a higher standard, and for this we
expected the admiration of our natal families, particularly
our mothers. We took for granted the same financial and
emotional support as our siblings.

Facts. Instead, we were ostracized.
Our mothers, whose approval we
desperately craved, seemed to
have no conception of, let alone
appreciation for, the lives we
chose. When one of us excitedly
showed her PhD diploma to her mother,
the latter promptly tossed it aside, declaring “a lot of
good that’ll do you.” The other author, complaining to her
mother about the burdens of chairing a factious personnel
committee, was told, “Oh, I know what you mean. When I
chaired the grade mothers, they fought over what kind of
cookies to serve at the Christmas party.”

For both of us, reports of tenure and publications were
welcomed with only a fraction of the joy and enthusiasm
elicited by a grandchild’s B in math. Our parents have re-
peatedly given extravagant gifts, financial and otherwise,
to our siblings, while despite our similar needs and equal
or better fulfillment of family obligations, we went empty-
handed. One of us is slated to receive a smaller inherit-
ance because she has no children.

Their dispensation of sympathy, praise and assistance
suggests that our parents rank us beneath siblings with
spouses and children. This, we believe, is not irrational
favoritism, but rather a natural classification of offspring

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wherein those who generate traditional families are favored over "spinsters." We were wrong to expect feminism to alter this universal prejudice. Nearing fifty, we find ourselves left holding the "Old Maid" card—according to the rules of the childhood game, losers.

**The fictional fellows of feminism**

Feminist fantasy. In the traditional gender order, single childless women were pitted as victims or failures. Feminism, however, made marriage and motherhood options, indeed, potential dangers to fulfillment. Aside from physical intimacy, we didn't really need men. Still, relationships were allowed—with successful professional men attracted to an accomplished equal. We envisioned ourselves riding alongside these Prince Charmings on our own horses, off into the sunset of equally shared housework, child rearing, and fiscal responsibility. We would attract men not with our looks, but with our intelligence and achievements.

**Facts.** We need men and sometimes fall in love. But feminism has not significantly changed the game of romance. Still, to attract men, women must brush their hair, not brush up their resumes; eyeliner pencils, not wits, must be sharpened. How many men seek feminist partners? On a dating Website we surveyed, a number of them, listing qualities they considered undesirable in a woman, named "assertiveness"—a feminist mandate.

Feminism seems to destroy female habits of mind, ingrained over millennia, still necessary to keep a man. Our experiences are revealing.

Initially, we sought the Fictional Fellows of Feminism. We met our fair share of successful, available professional men. However, in the end, they preferred women who were willing to follow them selflessly—a capacity we, as feminists, had lost. Both of us have ended engagements or marriages when forced to choose between becoming homemakers (in the words of one author's husband, "being a wife") or full-time professionals.

Men less educated and professionally successful than ourselves resented our achievements. They became uncommunicative and nervous when we related our personal histories centered on career pursuits or conversed about our work. Subterranean resentments inevitably erupted, from subtle insults to our intelligence to the blatant accusation, "you think you know everything because you have a PhD." Thus, again, we faced a choice—be ourselves and lose the relationship, or preserve it by assuming a false identity.

Eventually, tired of being alone, we experimented with suppressing the feminist persona we had assiduously cultivated. For intelligence and self-confidence, we substituted home cooked meals, Victoria's Secret lingerie and fake incompetence. Recently, on a first date, when asked her educational background, one author mumbled, "a PhD," adding apologetically, "degrees don't really count." From his unmistakable wince, she correctly predicted there would be no second date.

Our more enduring relationships have been with men at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Fictitious Fellows of Feminism. "What do you mean, he doesn't have a job?" our mothers queried. "You're not coming for Thanksgiving because out-of-state travel violates his parole?" Despite the PhD phobia, these men moved in; while waiting for us to come home from work, cook dinner and don our lingerie, they watched TV and chatted with other women on the internet. We wouldn't have minded being the breadwinners; feminism had prepared us for this. Eventually, however, unable to tolerate financial dependence on a woman, these men left.

We can't help comparing ourselves unfavorably with our mothers and sisters whose traditional femininity won them enduring financial and emotional support from decent men. Who, we have to ask, is "empowered," that is, realizes her objectives in relationships with men? Contrary to the 1970s expectation, men still prefer submissiveness to self-assertion, adoration to acumen, in women.

**The feminist fantasy of fame and fortune**

Feminist fantasy. Above all, feminism promised a satisfying professional life—in higher education, unlimited growth in a community devoted to intellectual achievement. The demonstration of competence would earn respect. Gender discrimination? Not in academics, the vanguard of progress. But should it occur, other women would rally 'round.

**Facts.** When we met, one of us had recently won a bloody battle for tenure and the other had begun this, despite the fact that each of us well exceeded minimal university requirements. University politics shattered our naive faith that honoring and achieving academic ideals would be rewarded. Prudence prevents disclosure of the particulars in each case. Suffice it to say, that in both instances, problems began when we failed to meet colleagues' (gender-related, we believe) expectations of mediocrity and passive conformity. We excelled and spoke out—and were nearly destroyed for it.

In both cases, the character assaults, malice and concerted efforts to remove us from our positions were outrageous enough to cause administrators to solicit outside mediation. It seems doubtful that such tactics of intimidation would have been deployed against a male colleague; the perpetrators apparently assumed that, frightened and helpless, we would simply give up. We didn't. Tenure was a Pyrrhic victory.

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Each of us continues to experience the floating contempt of those disappointed by our survival. Moreover, the hope of support from female colleagues was dashed. Indeed, other women sided against us, exhibiting stereotypical female jealousy, backstabbing, and currying.

**The sad and the future**

The feminism of the 1970s must now be assessed in light of its fruits in the lives of women who embraced it. Having done so unconditionally, we provide unambiguous cases. Are we, as feminists, better off than our moth-
ers? As young women, they gave birth to children; our labor produced doctoral dissertations. They pleased husbands; we must satisfy administrators and editors. They followed recipes; we publish research. They cleaned their houses; we do too—and pay the mortgage. They face old age with familial support; we dread dying alone. Clearly, both paths require self-sacrifice and struggle. Either can be pursued heroically.

However, all things considered—and maybe we’re just tired—we both have fantasies of swapping textbooks for cookbooks, the title of “Dr.” for “Mrs.,” and committee meetings for Tupperware parties. The traditional female exchange of independence for security, the deal our mothers brokered, seems like a bargain. Venturing alone into the jungle when we could have stayed by the hearth—what were we thinking?

What can we salvage of our youthful feminism? We would like to believe that the gender revolution we helped initiate progresses today. However, while there have been improvements in employment opportunities for women, the more difficult and critical task of changing gender perceptions seems to have been abandoned.

Our parents’ generation and male peers continue to operate on traditional assumptions; apparently so does the upcoming generation. From informal classroom surveys and advising, most students embrace the gender roles of the 1950s. Young women limit career plans to a few years after college, ultimately seeking a man who will provide a diamond engagement ring, a new last name, and financial support for themselves and their children. As full-blown feminists, we find ourselves in a small, aging minority, holding a sputtering torch that no one wants to carry forward. Like the Charleston or the Twist, the feminism of the 1970s resembles a fad more than a revolution.

On the positive side, notwithstanding the failures of the feminist movement, we still maintain that women are as capable as men in every important arena. Quite clearly, behind this essay lies personal outrage that full-time pursuit of a career means sweeping sacrifices men do not have to make. We have evolved from fad-followers to lifelong principled advocates of equity, a worthy ideal despite failed implementation. Whatever the reality, women are entitled to cultivate themselves as men have, without social penalty. As we inch toward the grave, we tell ourselves that self-determination is better than security. We have contributed to the world of ideas and the critical task of educating the young, creating, as opposed to inheriting, a path to fulfillment.

As pioneers, we have survived blizzards, getting stuck in the mud and losing the map. Stronger for the adventure, we nevertheless find ourselves far short of the Golden West, doubtful that anyone will ever reach it. Maybe the time has come to slaughter the sacred cow and get rid of the bull. Feminists need to engage in constructive revision, replacing fantasies with facts. Conservative Christians have pronounced feminism unwise and unworkable. Other than throwing in the towel, what are our options?

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