CONSUMERISM, INDIVIDUALISM, AND ANTI-ACTIVISM

The war between the sexes is over. We won okay? We won the second women started doing pole dancing for exercise.

—JACOB (played by Ryan Gosling) in Crazy, Stupid, Love

Introducing Post-feminist Anti-feminism

The era of “post-feminism” emerged in the 1990s and continues today. Post-feminism is distinguished by the depoliticization of feminist goals and an opposition to collective feminist action. A post-feminist perspective is grounded in the assumption that women’s material needs have mostly been met and that a feminist movement is no longer necessary. Post-feminist rhetoric often acknowledges the positive effects of feminism and incorporates some of the language of the feminist movement such as “empowerment” and “choice.” Ostensible empowerment in the marketplace through consumerism and in lifestyle choice has replaced the earlier political and intellectual work of feminism. Whereas feminism used to focus on women wanting to have control over their bodies, for instance in the area of reproductive choice, post-feminism utilizes “choice” to pick products for purchase. Whereas feminism used to focus on pay equality and discrimination in the workplace, post-feminism encourages women to focus on their private lives and consumer capacities as a means of self-expression and agency. The media help undermine feminist objectives by placing the focus of women’s empowerment on self-transformation rather than social transformation. Post-feminism is assimilationist in that white, heterosexual, and middle-class women’s issues are generalized to all women. The assumption that women’s material needs have been met and they can now demonstrate empowerment through consumer choices illustrates the Western, middle-, and upper-middle class assumptions of post-feminism. Post-feminism is especially suited to the neoliberal politics popularized in the United States and United Kingdom in the 1980s. Neoliberalism is a system that attempts to dismantle the social welfare programs (e.g., government work programs, aid to farmers) that have been in place since the New Deal in the
United States, and it is characterized by a pro-business capitalism that supports the redistribution of resources upward without regard for the widening inequalities such a system produces.

The era of post-feminism corresponds to what has been referred to as the third wave of feminism (the first wave being roughly from the 1840s to the 1920s and the second wave roughly from the 1960s to the 1980s, peaking in the 1970s). Some feminist writers see a clear distinction between third-wave feminism and post-feminism, whereas others see them as the same—both as versions of anti-feminism. Those who distinguish the two describe third-wave feminism as an extension of the historical trajectory of first- and second-wave feminism to better accommodate contemporary political culture and the logic of women as consumer citizens. Two of the most well-known of the third-wave feminists, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, articulated third-wave feminism in their popular 2000 book, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future.* Their stated goal was to widen the borders of feminism to include more contemporary manifestations. They argue that third-wave feminism is structured as a more diverse, inclusive, and integrated movement with the goal of diversifying its approach to activism and social change through social media and *zines* and different feminist subcultures such as *riot grrrl* culture popular in the 1990s. One important stated goal of third-wave feminism is to be explicitly inclusive in terms of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability, relative to the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (i.e., second wave). Third-wave feminists, conscious of the white- and heterosexual-centered limitations of the second-wave movement, seek to include women who had been previously marginalized. Still other feminist scholars do not find utility in classifying the feminist movement into three waves, especially for Latina and African American feminism. For example, the 1980s was a vibrant period for feminists of color with the publication of new classic works such as Angela Davis's 1981 *Women, Race & Class,* bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* in 1984,* Audre Lorde's Sister Outsider* in 1984,* and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981.

This chapter explores the landscape of popular culture, politics, and psychology, emphasizing relatively recent moves away from feminist activism to individualism and consumerism where "self-empowerment" represents women's progress. First, post-feminism borrows the rhetoric of feminism with references to "choice" and "empowerment." But the post-feminist version of these terms is very different from what actual feminists mean. Second, post-feminism moves away from collective action, protest, and resistance—the cornerstone of all civil rights movements—to an individualism and consumerism ethic. Third, a hypersexualization of girls and women is key to post-feminism—now women can "choose" to be sexual objects. Finally, in addition to examining popular culture and political illustrations of post-feminism, we examine recent psychological research on the ways in which women's attitudes about feminism mirror this anti-collectivist, individualist trend. Psychology studies find that young adults are less likely than previous generations to believe that activism is necessary to improve women's status in society.

Empowerment, Choice, and Personal Responsibility

In her book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change,* Angela McRobbie describes a process in which feminism is acknowledged and then dismissed in the post-feminist era of the early 21st century. Post-feminist rhetoric recognizes the principles and accomplishments of feminism and incorporates them into a post-feminist discourse. Employing terms such as "empowerment" and "choice," these elements are reframed into an individualistic discourse, then deployed in a new guise, by media, popular culture, and politics, as a substitute for feminism. Feminism is utilized to explain and promote individual choice, and the success of feminism is cited as an argument for why further social change is unnecessary, and any negative outcome for women is their own fault.

Popular films such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and the popular television series and films in the *Sex and the City* franchise reflect this deployment of certain palatable elements of women's liberation, such as sexual freedom and economic independence. But the elements of feminism that would question the obsession with beauty and cosmetics, rampant consumerism, and hyperfemininity are ignored. McRobbie describes *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw as displaying a "cloaking girlie infantilism" that undercuts any authority she might have as a writer for a reputable newspaper. U.S. films such as *The Ugly Truth* (2009) and *The Proposal* (2009) reflect additional elements of post-feminism. In *The Ugly Truth* Katherine Heigl plays a controlling, high-powered morning TV producer who is forced to work with Gerard Butler, who plays a lewd and rude sexist tell-it-like-it-is relationship expert. In *The Proposal,* Sandra Bullock plays the controlling high-powered über-bitch executive who forces her earnest underling played by Ryan Reynolds to marry her so she can avoid deportation. In both films, we find that the main characters are independent career women—acknowledging the economic progress of women, thanks in part to the second wave of feminism. However, these professionally successful characters are portrayed as self-loathing, bossy, uptight, and utterly without personal lives. *What they need is a man.* Before they can get a man, they must experience a "mortifying comeuppance"—a debasing punishment for their independent relationship-less lives. Under post-feminism, these modern shrews must be tamed. In *The*
there are endless options for women today, and that striving for self-improvement will be rewarded in a meritocratic system. The young women Baker interviewed were optimistic that they could do anything, even those facing terrible odds due to early motherhood and lack of formal education.  

Although this optimism allows the imagination of a different future in which things can be better, it puts the onus solely on the shoulders of the individual—the state, politics, and any kind of collective action is irrelevant to improving people’s lives. These narratives are indicative of post-feminism that draws on a notion of rational actors who can free themselves from restrictions if they simply have the motivation. This rationalization depoliticizes the inequitable social structures that have an impact on their lives.

These young women are in perfect sync with the rhetoric of neoliberalism in which opportunity is something of one’s own making and failure one’s own fault. In drawing on the language of individualism, these women are reluctant to associate with a group that would be seen as victims, since victimhood would undermine their carefully constructed sense of agency that is vital to their identity narratives. According to Rich’s analysis, to view their circumstances through a feminist lens was to be associated with disadvantage, or to draw upon a position of victim, a pathetic female. Victimhood is strenuously avoided as it is associated with insufficient personal drive, a lack of personal responsibility for one’s own life, and self-pity.

During the interviews, conversations about gender inequality are either absent or dismissed by the women interviewed as a thing of the past, and those who complain about inequality are stigmatized by the interviewees as unfeminine. A feminist analysis would rupture an imagined sense of self-determination so intimately tied to the discourse of individualism. Baker observes that neoliberal and post-feminist discourses have foreclosed any articulation of inequality or oppression in social relations, so instead the participants emphasize their sense of agency and self-determination. Both groups of women articulate success in terms of individual responsibility. Opportunity and failure are something of one’s own making.

However, the emphasis on personal responsibility means that challenges tend to be understood as psychological (as opposed to structural) and as manifestations of personal failings or inadequacies. Most notably, Baker found that among the young women, it was the least advantaged who distanced themselves from the specter of disadvantage. Even domestic violence is looked at in the context of a personal experience rather than as a phenomenon that is, to some degree, explained by structural circumstances and unequal power relations between women and men. The tendency to use individualizing discourse not only facilitates a misunderstanding of people’s own actual circumstances, but it also forgoes empathy for others; sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination are simply
individual problems or are not problems at all. Thus, harm from men’s violence against women and the difficulties of single parenthood have been individualized, thus effectively privatizing personal experience that is, in part, structurally produced and profoundly gendered.25

Despite the supposed access to unprecedented choice, the findings emerging from these interviews suggest that the new possibilities for young women are still grounded in traditionally gendered and classed boundaries. The women interviewed seek stereotypical careers in altruistic and people-oriented occupations rather than male-dominated jobs.26 They position themselves as autonomous individuals free to choose whatever occupation they desire, yet ultimately they prioritized the role of women as wives and mothers.27 The young women’s aspirations reflect cultural and historical limits, but like the women in popular culture, these young women account for their restricted vision in a post-feminist framework of presumed equality and personal choice. Rather than being confined by gender inequality and pressure to play out traditional roles, these women simply “choose” to be traditional.

The personal choice and empowerment discourse goes beyond women’s career choices and takes a disturbing form in Katy Day and Tammy Keys28 analysis of “pro-eating-disorder” websites. These websites offer tips for girls and women for maintaining and hiding an eating disorder. Their analysis of the material from websites revealed that the practice of self-starvation or binging was often reframed as an empowering lifestyle choice as opposed to a pathology or the result of a beauty industry that creates, and then profits from, women’s insecurities. Starving and binging is framed as an attempt to reclaim control over the female body and as nonconformity in what is described as a fat, gluttonous world. The women who post on these websites describe themselves as enlightened, even part of an elite group. For instance, one woman posts, “This is a place for the elite who, through personal determination in their ongoing quest for perfection, demonstrate daily that Ana [anorexia] is the ONLY way to live.”29 Day and Keys’ research demonstrates that destructive health behaviors such as anorexia are recoded by the girls and women as signaling empowerment and control. In this case, empowerment takes the form of unhealthy behavior rather than a feminist resistance to impossible beauty norms.

Consumerism, Individualism, but Not Activism

From the preceding discussion, we see that individualism and consumerism make collective action appear unnecessary, irrelevant, and obsolete. In this regard, post-feminism is consistent with the neoliberal corporatist30 doctrine of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School theory of economics. This corporatist agenda was embraced by Ronald Reagan and, to varying degrees, by every subsequent U.S. president. The corporatist doctrine seeks to privatize anything and everything. The goal is for a tiny government with huge transfers of wealth from public into private, for-profit, hands. In her book The Shock Doctrine, Naomi Klein31 describes how U.S. presidential administrations beginning with Reagan in the 1980s began to sell off or source large, publicly owned entities such as water, electricity, highway management, and garbage collection to private companies. Likewise, in Britain under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the government privatized British Telecom, British Gas, British Airways, British Airport Authority, and British Steel. By the time George W. Bush was named president in 2000, many public schools began to be replaced by vouchered private charter schools. Many U.S. prisons became privatized and for-profit, now financially dependent on a constant stream of new inmates to keep beds filled. And by the time the U.S. invaded Iraq and Afghanistan in 2001 and 2003, even war was outsourced with a record number of for-hire mercenaries employed by companies such as Blackwater.32

How does the move from public holdings to private relate to anti-feminism? Post-feminism is part of a corporatist and neoliberal political economy that encourages women to focus on their private lives and consumer capacities for self-expression and agency.33 A central feature of neoliberalism is the implanting of market cultures across everyday life, the relentless pursuit of welfare “reform” (reducing help for the poor), and the encouragement of forms of consumer citizenship that are beneficial only to those who are already privileged. Undoing the anti-hierarchical struggles of social movements is also a priority within the discourse of neoliberalism. In a neoliberal context, there is no room for collective action. An attack on disadvantaged social groups is masked by the ostensibly nonracist and nonsexist language of self-esteem, empowerment, and personal responsibility. The post-feminist emphasis on consumerism divides women by class and by region. If empowerment for women is measured by purchasing power, those who can afford to consume and those who cannot will find little common ground and solidarity. Globally, there is little opportunity for building coalitions between the Western women who consume products made in developing countries and the girls and women who make the products that Western women purchase.

The emphasis on individualism and consumerism says a woman can be whatever she wants to be: who she becomes is up to her and is disconnected from history and uninfluenced by social movements or the struggles of past generations. With women’s progress in the workplace and marketplace there is a narrative of the successful woman. Women have as much or more education as men34 and, as we will see in Chapter 4, employers can pay them less.35 At the same time there is
an emphasis on girls and women as consumers. Companies draw on the language of "girl power" as if to bestow on their products a sense of dynamism, modernity, and innovation. As a consequence, girls are gender-differentiated and marketed to as consumers at younger and younger ages.36

Magazines targeting girls such as "CattlinGIRL!" and Teen Vogue emphasize this individual-empowerment-through-consumption "feminism." In her analysis of teen girl magazines, Jessalynn Keller finds a defanged feminism where feminism is fun, and is a celebration of individual agency. This kind of feminism comes with the promise that hard work and dedication will lead to success and an empowered life. The individualized version of feminism offered by these mainstream teen magazines may be more easily accepted by corporate, mainstream publications because the message coincides with the larger cultural narratives about hard work, success, and the "American Dream." This version of feminism avoids any criticism of capitalism and, as a result, fails to incorporate important analysis that was the cornerstone of feminist critique, such as criticism of the beauty industry, in favor of presenting topics in a fun, playful tone. This "fun-feminism" is problematic because male dominance, power, and privilege are not addressed, and the feminism presented is merely stylistic and not directed toward social change. Keller argues that while the individualistic expression of feminism is not inherently problematic, by itself, it offers girls a grossly limited understanding of contemporary power relations. It overlooks structural barriers such as sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism—factors that continue to impact girls’ lives. Social change is rendered irrelevant, and personal change through consumerism is coded as empowerment.

A popular U.S. reality television show, Undercover Boss, captures this individualistic worldview. The show depicts corporate CEOs who go undercover in disguise and work within their own organization. Each episode follows a specific format. The CEO, introduced as a new employee, gets to know a handful of workers in the organization, and learns of their struggles to balance work and family obligations, pay their way through part-time college, and be loyal to the company. This witnessing of the workers’ tribulations in many cases brings tears to the eyes of the CEO and each episode culminates in the revelation that the new employee is actually the boss. The CEO provides gifts mostly in the form of money to the needy workers. For instance, one employee reports earlier in the episode that she hasn’t been able to take a vacation with her family in years, and so the CEO pays for a family vacation. Another employee has kids but cannot afford college for them, so the CEO contributes $20,000 for a college fund for this employee’s children. There are a few instances of more structural changes to accommodate workers, such as giving back a 10% wage cut the workers accepted when two companies merged, or adding smoking cessation to the employee medical plan so anyone in the company who wants to quit smoking will get help. By and large, however, the changes in the form of generous offerings made by the newly raised consciousness of the CEO are specific to three or four individual workers, keeping the struggles of all the other workers in the company (and in corporatized America) unchanged.

Even the most obvious structural racial inequality gets an individualized spin in this individualist era. Keffrlyn Brown and Anthony Brown analyzed the depictions of slavery in ten popular fifth and eighth grade social studies textbooks. They found that even something undeniably systemic and structural—U.S. slavery—was framed in individualized terms. The texts failed to show how racial violence operated systematically to oppress African Americans’ opportunities and social mobility in the United States. The textbooks do not present the slave trade and slavery as based in our fundamental institutions such as law and religion. Rather, the perpetrators of violence against enslaved African Americans are falsely portrayed as individual actors, or "bad men" who were deviant and not necessarily a reflection of the larger social, economic, and political structures. When discussing resistance to racial violence, stories focused again on individual, isolated efforts that concealed the organized and systematic ways that enslaved Americans and free blacks acted against their social condition. These individualized (and inaccurate) depictions of slavery and resistance prevent students from understanding the structural and institutional nature of racism.9 Instead, students may come to view racial violence as isolated events in the past that were done by a few bad people and that only affected the individuals directly involved. Students are led to believe that present day treatment of blacks couldn’t have anything to do with the legacy of structural racism rooted in slavery centuries ago.

We see a trend toward individualism in the psychological literature on narcissism—characterized by self-absorption, inflated ego, entitlement, and disregard for others. In her work on cultural and historic trends in narcissism, Jean Twenge finds generational differences, arguing that narcissism has increased over the last 30 years.48 Younger people are more narcissistic than older people and young people score higher on individual traits and lower on communal and expressive traits. Interestingly, women have become more instrumental (individualistic and acentric), making them adaptive to the workplace and education, although men have not become more communal and expressive.49 Even lyrics to popular songs demonstrate a change toward individualism. An analysis of popular songs in the United States from 1980 to 2007 found an increase in words related to a focus on the self: Specifically, songs showed changes toward more first-person singular pronouns (I, me, mine) and fewer first-person plural pronouns (we, us, our) over time.50
describes a process she calls *disarticulation*, the force that devalues, negates, and makes unthinkable the possibility of coming together, on the widely promoted assumption that there is no longer any need for such actions. Disarticulation operates through the widespread dissemination of values that typecast feminism as having been fueled by anger and hostility toward men (a topic we address in Chapter 3). Feminist activists are constructed as embittered, unfeminine, and repugnant. Young women are discouraged from getting involved in controversial or confrontational political areas (particularly issues such as sex work or pornography) for fear of offending men and being branded a feminist. This reluctance results in the stifling of dissent, debate, and solidarity among women.49

A study by Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell60 dissects the stereotype of the unattractive feminist activist. Edley and Wetherell examined men's constructions of feminists and feminism in their interviews with U.K. men ranging from age 17 to 64 from a variety of class and ethnic backgrounds. They found two competing versions of feminists and feminism. The first, the liberal feminist, was frequently presented as a woman simply wanting equality. The second version of feminist was a hyperbolic theatrical representation, with the men providing information about her physical appearance, sexual orientation, and attitudes toward men. The two versions of feminists worked in a "Jekyll and Hyde" fashion. Like Jekyll, feminists and feminism in the first version have a nonthreatening, sane, and rational character. Feminist aspirations for gender equality were reported as simple, ordinary, reasonable matters of fact. Dr. Jekyll is the ordinary woman who simply wants equality. In stark contrast, there is Ms. Hyde, the unfeminine feminist and extreme political activist. A person should be in favor of equality (Jekyll) but not be fanatical about it (Hyde). We should all want equality, but not too ardently. The men believed that change is slow and requires patience. Extremists therefore are trying to change the course of history. They are too pushy. The men interviewed by Edley and Wetherell seemed to believe that the improvement of women's position in Western society has occurred regardless of the efforts of feminists. Their belief is that we are getting there, slowly but surely, and women should be patient and tolerant of current inequalities. The most readily available ways of talking (and thinking) about feminism encourages men (and perhaps women) to identify with a definition of feminism that is patient, moderate, and stripped of any radical potential.51

Male dominance is also partly achieved through attempts to obscure women's resistance by characterizing collective female resistance as negative and unfeminine, implying that feminists are unattractive to men. Once such a negative category is in place, feminism can be used as an accusation, and a means of silencing assertive women.52 No reasonable woman would want to identify as a feminist as long as the extremist caricature exists.

Shelly Budgeon49 finds this highly individualist focus in her interviews with young women. She interviewed 33 young women in the United Kingdom about the women's movement and gender inequality. The suggestion that their choices and opportunities might be limited by external factors was met with a strong expression of individualism. Joanne Baker's interviews with young Australian women described earlier also find young women articulating their lives through an individualist lens. The ideology of neoliberalism intensifies this entrenchment of a selfhood that is individuated and that the economic and social world can be best understood as constituted of self-directed, self-sufficient individual behavior that is informed by rational choice in the pursuit of self-interest. These young women's emphasis on individual improvement is unlikely to facilitate an openness to feminism or an orientation toward collective action for social change. Even more troubling, in addition to the tendency to deny one's own difficulties, this "can-do" neoliberal discourse also appears to foreclose voicing compassion for others experiencing oppression or challenging circumstances and the recognition of how social structures act on individuals. Complementing these interviews, a recent meta-analysis of 72 studies on empathy found a decrease in empathy and perspective-taking among American college students from 1979 to 2009.64 Therefore, the obligation to demonstrate plucky individualism has consequences that extend beyond individual psychological processes, impacting broader social consequences with the lack of regard for others' plights.

A main feature of post-feminism is the acknowledgment that choices young women have today are due in large part to the women's liberation movement before them. However, the legacy of feminism is not recognized by some of the very women who benefit from it today and who believe they have choices. That they do not recognize the role of feminism in their freedoms is an indication of the extent to which feminism in the early 21st century is not a marginalized discourse but has become an integral part of young women's lives. In order to demonstrate the empowerment and success expected of them, women in this post-feminist individualist culture seemingly need to dissociate themselves from feminism: precisely because young women feel empowered, they believe they no longer need feminism.66

Unlike the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, there is little movement in post-feminism. A key theme of this chapter is the post-feminist focus on self-transformation rather than structural transformation, the core assumption being that any kind of collective action is unnecessary, repellant, and, as demonstrated in the previous section, shows weakness.67 Post-feminism offers a defanged feminism, offering lifestyle and an assertive can-do attitude in place of the hard political and intellectual work that feminists have done. Angela McRobbie68
Indeed, recent empirical work on attitudes about feminism finds further evidence for this anticollectivist trend. Young adults in the 21st century are less likely than previous generations to believe that collective action is necessary to improve women’s status in society. Also, young women are reluctant to identify as feminists if they believe feminists are activists. In Chapter 6, we address the question of whether not a feminist identity is good for women in terms of psychological and social health. We will see that there are distinct differences between women who call themselves feminists and those who agree with the principles of feminism but do not label themselves as feminists. Women who self-label as feminists, as opposed to women who merely believe in the principles of feminism, are more likely to believe that gender inequality exists and that women (and men) must work together to end sexism. Self-labeled feminists are more likely to see beyond the individualist rhetoric of post-feminism and recognize the need for societal change. Consequently, feminists need to remain focused on raising women’s awareness of continued gender inequality in order to motivate young women to understand that work still needs to be done.

Post-feminist Sexualization

In her book, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism’s Work Is Done*, media critic Susan Douglas defines and distinguishes embedded feminism and enlightened sexism. Embedded feminism is the assumption that women’s achievements are now simply part of the media landscape. Feminism is no longer marginal, outside of the media, as it was in, say, the 1960s. For instance, we see women on television as police captains, doctors, and lawyers. Enlightened sexism takes the gains of the women’s movement as a given, and then uses those gains to resurrect retrograde images of girls and women as sexual objects still defined by their appearance. Now that women have it all, they should focus their energy on their true power—their bodies, attire, and sexuality—power that is fun, power that will not alienate men. Embedded feminism and enlightened sexism serve to reinforce each other: they both exaggerate women’s gains and accomplishments and render feminism obsolete.

Post-feminist empowerment and choice rhetoric discussed earlier tells women they can now choose to be sexualized and objectified, and they can disregard their second-wave feminist grandmothers who would cringe in disapproval. This trend is seen in the increased promotion and popularity of pole-dancing among suburban middle class women as exercise and at-home entertainment for their male partners. The popularity in the United States of the *Pussy Cat Dolls* in the early 2000s, the franchise dance troupe with a rotating cast made up of young women with sexually explicit dance routines, also reflects this diversion from the politics of feminism. Feminism is evoked and claimed regarding sexual freedom, but then is quickly dismissed with relief—no more feminist nagging about the sexual objectification of women. In post-feminism it is permissible once again to enjoy the scantily clad bodies of women. Angela McRobbie also notes the expansion of wedding culture. The prominence of wedding culture, apart from contributing to the expansion of consumer culture, rides on this tidal wave of celebratory post-feminism, as though to say, thank goodness, girls can be girls again, the feminist Debbie Downers of the 1960s and 1970s are long gone.

An implicit assumption of post-feminism is that women’s status has improved. Progress has been slow perhaps, but portrayals of women in popular culture and real-world opportunities for women have progressed over the last several decades. To be sure, in some domains things have gotten better for girls and women. However, there is one area that has gotten startlingly worse in the last two decades: the sexualization and objectification of girls and women in mass media. John Mager and James Helgeson examined 50 years of advertising images of women and men in major magazines. Common sense might predict that portrayals of women in print ads have gotten better. In some ways they have. For instance, early ads depicted women in the home happy to be passively domestic. More recent ads do not show such traditional images. Ads today, however, still show women as dependent on men and still in need of men’s protection, such as those in previous decades. Men today are still more likely to be shown in authoritative, superior, and more powerful positions and women are in more deferential positions to men. Compared to men, women are also more likely to be positioned in weakened psychological states, looking away, disoriented, and even looking dead or passed out—and these depictions have actually increased over the 50-year period analyzed by Mager and Helgeson. Open a fashion magazine and you can find print ads depicting dead women from Marc Jacobs, Gucci, Lanvin, Jimmy Choo, and Louis Vuitton, and ads depicting gang rape by Calvin Klein, Dolce & Gabbana, and Tom Ford. These depictions are more prevalent today. Shock value in ads is used to break through the commercial clutter of competing ads and comes in many forms. One major strategy is to feature women’s sexual objectification. Sadly, when contemporary women’s own attitudes about sexual objectification in advertisements have been analyzed we find women are more accepting of and less offended by sexually objectified images of women than they were 10 or 20 years ago. We have become habituated to these images. They have become normalized. Furthermore, women report that an ad that demeanes women would not influence whether or not they purchased the particular product. Thus, advertising has fully embraced this post-feminist permission to objectify women and to some extent women in the early 21st century have embraced this too.
Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s fought for, among other things, control over their bodies—the right to control their reproduction, the right to love who they want, the right to extricate themselves from abusive relationships. The women’s liberation movement fought for the release of women from conventional morality around sex, which had confined them to either idealized chastity on the one hand or contemptible promiscuity on the other. Feminism allowed for the possibility of women engaging in sex for their own pleasure rather than for the two previously allowed reasons for sex: to reproduce or to please a husband. In the context of post-feminism, an era in which feminism is taken into account but then swiftly dismissed and debased, women’s sexual freedom manifests in porn culture and the hypersexualization of women and girls. The sexually affirming woman of the 1960s and 1970s has turned into a sexually objectified woman of post-feminism. Embedded feminism, enlightened sexism, and the lack of a collective and cohesive women’s liberation movement all contribute to this climate.

Post-feminism and the Domestication of Pornography

A major hallmark of post-feminism is the post-feminist “permission” to sexualize and objectify women—often by women themselves. In her book, Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism, Natasha Walters65 studies the rise of hypersexual culture. Far from giving a full range of women’s freedom and potential, the new hypersexual culture redefines women’s success through a narrow framework of sexual allure: Hotness. Once on the margins of society, pole dancing is articulated as liberating for women. Free yourself and feel empowered. And who wouldn’t want to wear high heels as they exercise? The narrowing of what it means to be sexy arises from the way that the sex industry has become more pervasive and more generally acceptable. In her book, Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture, Ariel Levy64 describes women’s embrace of porn culture, where the emphasis is on hotness and being sexy but not necessarily on being sexual. The distinction between sexy and sexual is important because it’s the difference between women being the subject of their sexuality versus women being objects of someone else’s desire. Levy writes that the intertwining of women embracing their own sexual objectification and the post-feminist culture of consumption puts sexual desire and arousal in the background, and looking hot and looking sexy in the foreground. Therefore, post-feminist hypersexuality has little to do with women feeling empowered to be in charge of their sexual desire, to explore passion, to expect sexual fulfillment, and more to do with looking like porn stars. Consistent with the principles of post-feminism, all this happens in the context of supposed free choice.

Let’s consider just a few recent and current trends that mark the mainstreaming of pornography and the hypersexualization of women in popular culture. Once a widespread but sequestered industry, pornography is now abundant and permeates the cultural space.63 This change is due in large part to the increased access to online pornography. That one can access a limitless range of pornography with just a few mouse taps means that it’s accessible to anyone with a computer or phone. A person used to slink into a seedy theater, bookstore, or club—now anyone can access hardcore pornography at home or work or even while commuting. Easy accessibility goes a long way to mainstreaming pornography, but the mainstreaming of pornography isn’t the only effect of Internet access to porn. A recent study found that newer pornographic media feature more violence against women than do older ones. Internet-based pornography is more likely to show sexual violence as nonconsensual with men victimizing women compared to magazine and video pornography.66 That Internet porn contains more violence against women is significant because it is violent pornography, not pornography in general, that has been linked to men’s aggression against women. In a classic experiment, Edward Donnerstein67 showed men a neutral, erotic, or aggressive-erotic film. Compared to the other films, exposure to the aggressive-erotic film led men to be aggressive toward both women and men, and especially more aggressive toward women.

Working in the sex industry used to signal the death of a mainstream career, but work in pornography is now seen as a stepping-stone to a more legitimate career in Hollywood. The mainstreaming of porn can be seen in the intertwining of pornography and music videos. Pornographic film directors now can be found directing mainstream music videos and former porn stars can be found starring in them.68 Girls Next Door—a reality TV show that debuted in 2005 on the E! network about Playboy founder Hugh Hefner’s three Playboy bunny girlfriends—was a mainstream hit that spawned spinoff shows for two of the bunnies, Holly’s World and Kendra. Sixteen-year-old teen actor-singer Miley Cyrus performed a pole dance at the 2009 Teen Choice Awards.69 On a 2012 episode of MTV’s Pauly D Project Britney Spears performs a lap dance for Jersey Shore reality star Paul “Pauly D” DelVecchio.70 These examples illustrate the conventionalization of the previously marginal and seamy porn industry.

Another noted consequence of the mainstreaming of pornography is the increase in women who wax or shave their pubic hair. The complete removal of all pubic hair—not just waxing the “bikini line”—has become normalized in recent years. Feminist writer Caitlin Moran argues that the increase in pubic hair removal coincides with the same trend in pornography. She writes, “Hollywood waxing is now total industry standard. Watch any porn made after say, 1988, and it’s all hairless down there: close-ups are like watching Daddy Warbucks, with no
eyes, eating a very large, fidgety sausage." Moran believes pubic hair is removed in hardcore pornography to enable viewers to see more in penetrative shots of intercourse. How does pubic hair removal become an internalized value for young women today? Moran argues that "hard-core pornography is now the primary form of sex education in the Western world. This is where teenage boys and girls are 'learning' what to do to each other, and what to expect when they take each other's clothes off." This phenomenon is problematic for several reasons. First, the pubic region has become yet another part of a woman's natural body—in addition to her legs and underarms—that needs to be altered in order to be viewed as attractive and sexually desirable. Second, women seem to time their waxing, shaving, and plucking according to when they may have sex and vice versa, rather than timing sex according to when they are least likely to become pregnant, or according to when they actually desire to have intercourse. Third, pubic waxing is another consumer product/service they must purchase, adding to the bloated consumer beauty industry. Fourth, shaving pubic areas increases the likelihood of infections, including sexually-transmitted diseases. Finally, that grown women's pubic area is modified to look like a prepubescent girls' area juvenilizes women, sexualizes young girls, and blurs the difference between the two.

Confusing Sexual Objectification with Empowerment

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s emphasized women's control over their own bodies and their own sexuality, while simultaneously critiquing the culture's sexual objectification of women in the form of Miss America pageants or Penthouse Pets. Drawing on the emphasis on sexual empowerment of the 1960s and 1970s, the third-wave feminism of the mid-1990s supposedly ushered in a nonjudgmental approach to sexuality. Given the forces of neoliberal consumerism and individualism, however, women's liberation seems to have been reduced to sexual liberation and in this context sexual liberation has come to mean sexual self-objectification. In other words, the post-feminist message is that being a sexual object is now a source of power. The result is that young women in the United States are encouraged by marketers, filmmakers, pornographers, and magazine publishers to participate in their own objectification. Instead of demanding the right to be seen as human beings, many of today's girls and women are cooperating with the old-fashioned notion of being seen as sex objects. It's the one kind of power that is sanctioned for women: the power to look hot and to draw attention to your hotness; the kind of power that doesn't threaten real power—political, economic, and cultural power. The use of the word empowerment is a strange distortion of what the term once meant to feminists. When feminists talked about empowerment in the past it was not in reference to a young woman in a thong twirling around a pole, wearing T-shirts that say "unbelievable knockers," or wearing sweat pants with the word "juicy" on the butt. The clothing brand Juicy Couture prints bags and laptop sleeves that say "Fun is back." Culturally, and assisted by such accouterments, girls and women can present themselves as fun and hip and distance themselves from their outdated, upright, feminist grandmothers.

The hypersexualized marketplace is reinforcing certain behavior (i.e., the hot young woman) and punishing other behavior (i.e., a woman perceived as an upright feminist), making it hard for many young women to find the space for alternative views of female sexuality and other ways for women to feel empowered. The smoke-and-mirrors language of choice and empowerment prevents people from seeing just how limiting such so-called choices can be. It's their choice and we shouldn't judge. So, it's stodgy old second-wave feminists who are judging these women. Feminists are upright and old fashioned, or worse, feminists are the oppressors in a post-feminist hypersexual context.

One of the most ironic domains displaying the hypersexualization, or at least hyper-feminization, of women may be one of the more paradoxical ones—women's sports. To acquire sponsors and appear in sports magazines, while not scaring off fans (particularly men), women athletes are pressured to present themselves as objects of femininity and obedience to traditional gender roles. Although the fact of women in sports challenges the historical and traditional association between masculinity and sport, media representations of women athletes sadly emphasize gender difference through a focus on the femininity of the athlete rather than her athletic strengths. This process of feminization constructs differences between women and men athletes and undermines challenges to the gender order. Women's athleticism is rendered unthreatening and feminine whereas men's athleticism is the real deal—masculine and strong. Some women professional athletes wear full make up during competition, bows in their hair, long fingernails, and other markers of femininity when they engage in the masculine activity of sports. Indeed many well-known professional and Olympic athletes have posed for Playboy magazine, including Amanda Beard (swimming), Gabrielle Reece (volleyball), Mia St. John (taekwondo/boxing), and Chyna (World Wrestling Entertainment).

The process of feminizing the professional woman athlete tends to occur for white women athletes more readily than black women. Because African American women have been historically denied access to full-time homemaking and deprived of sexual protection, black womanhood has not been tied in the same way as white womanhood to activities and attributes defined as distinctive and different from masculine attributes. Therefore, African American women historically have been located outside dominant culture's definition of
conventional (white) femininity. Victoria Carty argues that African American women athletes are seen as more conventionally athletic (i.e., masculine) than white women because black women's strength does not threaten traditional notions of beauty and femininity (coded as white) in the same way that white women's strength does. Therefore, media coverage of black women athletes is more about their athletic accomplishments compared to coverage of white women. For instance, Serena and Venus Williams have been described as "huge," "heavyweight fighter," "pummeling," and "masculine." African American women athletes are portrayed as lacking those features attributed to the norm of white heterosexual femininity. Carty argues that African American women athletes "may enjoy a greater expansion of gender roles and trespass more freely across the boundaries of traditional standards of femininity, because they have never been fully included in the stringent ideals of femininity and heterosexuality to begin with." 80

The hypersexualization of women in post-feminism is indeed raced and classed. The mainstreaming of the sex industry made popular "Pimp and Ho" parties in the past two decades, as well as the domestication of the term "pimp" as a noun and verb. The actual pimp and prostitute relationship, a fundamentally exploitative relationship involving a man profiting from the use and abuse of women's bodies, is lost when we pretend these terms and roles are simply playful (and supposedly sexy). "Pimp" and "ho" are also racialized images, in contemporary media representations and with historical roots in the construction of African American men as hypersexual predators and African American women as temptresses with poor sexual morals. 81 When white men and women perform these roles, whether or not they literally don blackface or afro wigs, they are playing a role along with gender and sexuality. In addition, playing with the "pimp and ho" dynamic has historical reverberations for African Americans about which white people can be oblivious. It's one thing for an economically privileged white woman to dress scantily and perform the role of "ho" for a party; it's another for women of color or working class women to be culturally cast as whores. 82 African American women's bodies have been sexualized and sexually abused since slavery. The image of African American women as inherently sexual and immoral functioned to justify their sexual assault by slaveholders, making the rape of a black woman no crime, literally. A 19th-century legal treatise, for example, explicitly blames interracial sex on the "want of chastity" in the female slaves, and a corresponding immorality in the white males. 83 An 1859 Mississippi ruling declared that "[t]he crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves," because "their intercourse is promiscuous." 84 The legacies of such policies and practices continue to circulate in contemporary law and culture. In this context, for African American women, wearing revealing clothing, engaging in public displays of affection, and even wearing makeup can be seen as a confirmation of black women's promiscuity and lewdness. 85

The mainstreaming of the sex industry has coincided with a point in history where there is less social and economic mobility than in previous generations. 86 No wonder then if the ideal that the sex industry pushes—that status can be won by any woman if she is prepared to flaunt her body—is now finding fertile ground among many young women who would never imagine a career in, say, politics.

Finally, the use of sexual attractiveness to gain status translates feminism into an act of using one's body as an object to obtain a specific type of attention, as opposed to a political movement that seeks gender equality and social justice at the structural and institutional level. Some individual women might think these "choices" work for them, but they are not necessarily good for women in general (and they might not, in fact, "work" for them, even as individuals). Post-feminists have overlooked the fact that men do not have to rely on such strategies because institutions such as education, mass media, and politics—historically and currently—privilege men and marginalize women, as we will see throughout this book. Thus, in post-feminism the structural arrangements that create and maintain sexism tend to go unacknowledged.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored post-feminism marked by the shift from feminism as a collective movement for women's liberation to superficial empowerment of the individual and her choices. In post-feminism, feminist goals are depoliticized and collective action is rendered irrelevant and unnecessary. In post-feminism, feminism is taken into account and is incorporated into political and institutional life but only as much as it allows a narrow self-empowerment. As Angela McRobbie 87 argues, there is a kind of exchange, and a process of displacement and substitution: Young women are offered equality in name, concretized in education and employment, and through membership in consumer culture and the public sphere—in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer. 88 In this neoliberal corporatist context, sexual power and purchasing power are presented as more gratifying and empowering than institutional, political or economic power. 89 Post-feminism is about the individual woman—personal choice, individual expression, and individual career success—and no recognition of the need for a united and collective social movement to liberate all women and enact structural change. 90 The language of individualism, choice, and empowerment in this consumerist context functions to tell women that a feminist movement is unnecessary, passé, and unattractive. Certainly women have choices but these
choices occur in a limited context. Women are being disempowered through the rhetoric of empowerment they are offered as substitutes for feminism.\textsuperscript{91}

Post-feminism is integral to a neoliberal framework because it undermines feminism and doesn’t threaten what neoliberalists hold dear—profitability, privatization, and individualism. These strategies masquerade as common sense.\textsuperscript{92} Post-feminism is a politics not of resistance or transformation, but of capitulation: to patriarchy, to neoliberalism, and to corporate control over public issues that affect us all.\textsuperscript{93} Neoliberalism privileges private, corporate solutions to social problems and tends to marginalize critiques of oppression (racism and classism, as well as sexism) as subordinating practices—those who critique the system of inequality, we are told, focus too much on victimhood rather than on individual effort.\textsuperscript{94}

The depoliticized notion that feminism is anything a woman says it is refigures the Women’s Liberation Movement into a milder “women’s movement” minus “liberation” (and even minus “movement”). Abandoning the analysis of structural inequality, post-feminism masks the systemic forces that continue to oppress women and undercuts the possible strategic weight of politicized feminist collectivities.\textsuperscript{95}

This post-feminist environment makes unlikely the forging of alliances between Western and non-Western women. The sexual and consumer freedoms of some in the West now actively pitch them against the gender arrangements of other cultures.\textsuperscript{96} Women in the West are encouraged to demonstrate their empowerment through rampant consumerism. Who is likely to make the products that these women purchase? Women in the developing world work in sweatshops for ever lower pay with each passing decade. In November 2012 a fire at a garment factory in Bangladesh killed more than 100 workers, mostly young women. The sweatshop made clothing for Wal-Mart, Disney, Sears, and other retailers.\textsuperscript{97} Only five months later on April 24, 2013 another factory in Bangladesh that made clothing for U.S. and European companies collapsed, killing more than 1,000 sweatshop workers. Apparel companies are attracted to countries such as China and Bangladesh because the young women workers can be paid as low as 14 cents an hour and can be forced to work 14 hours a day.\textsuperscript{98} If, as post-feminism dictates, empowerment is individual, not collective, the links between women globally is obscured and the potential for solidarity among women is foreclosed.

The trends of post-feminism emerging in the last two decades, in conjunction with more recent events such as the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, work in concert to limit and confine the range of possible identities and roles for women. The next chapter addresses the effect of 9/11 on gender roles, and a later chapter addresses women who resist the restricted roles of women provided by post-feminism and 9/11.

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77. For example: http://www.com/collection/accessories/little-luxuries/ Juicy Butt
http://www.hollywoodgrind.com/tag/juicy-couture/ 7/25/2012
Fun is back.
POST-FEMINISM POST-9/11

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the femaleists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say "you helped 9/11 happen."

—REVEREND JERRY FALWELL, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001

It is difficult to exaggerate the effect that the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 had on nearly every aspect of American culture. Just as baby boomers recall where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated, the present generation will remember where they were when they heard of the 9/11 attacks. The short- and medium-term impact of these attacks on the American people was more than the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There was a war on progress that accelerated soon after the towers fell.

This chapter explores one set of consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attacks: the rolling back of progress on civil and human rights and the retreat to traditional gender roles. We explore the post-9/11 trends that reflect the swiftness with which progress toward civil rights and equality reverts to traditional patriarchal patterns of men as breadwinners/protectors and women as homemakers/victims during times of crisis. The dust had not even settled after the fall of the Twin Towers when many specific gains and the general progress of the women's movement were swept away, leaving reinstitutionalized "old-fashioned" patriarchal values.

This chapter is divided into two parts. First we look at the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the emergence of a gendered dominant narrative in the media. Social psychological theories such as terror management join political and media analysis in an effort to explain the reactions to the 9/11 attacks and the corresponding retreat to traditional gender roles. Next, the post-9/11 retro trends such as the media-reported "nesting" trend and popularity of "comfort food," the popularity of television shows that capture elements of a romantic patriarchal past, and even the emergence of the purity ball as a way to control young women's sexuality are examined. Finally, we explore these events and trends and their relationship to anti-feminist post-feminism.

September 11 and the Retreat to Traditional Gender Roles

It's probably a good thing they have blindfolds over the justice lady with the scales because if she could see what's going on she'd probably be pretty disgusted.

—DAVE GAUKROGER, 2013

After the terror attacks on 9/11, President George W. Bush addressed the nation, and the joint session of Congress, and characterized the attacks as "a world where freedom itself is under attack." President Bush specified that "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." Those who committed the terrorist act were 'enemies of freedom.' Bush insisted that "they hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." In closing, President Bush declared "freedom and fear are at war."

Apparently fear won because shortly after these declarations from the president, freedom, American or otherwise, was under attack. Not from Al Qaeda or Iraq but from within. By January of 2002, only four months after the attacks, a detention camp under U.S. military control at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba opened to imprison boys and men who were captured in Afghanistan—the planning center of the 9/11 attacks. Those detained were labeled "enemy combatants"—a vague military term that allowed the detainees to not be treated as prisoners of war, and thus without the rights guaranteed to those accused of crimes. Detainees were not afforded due process rights, the right to a speedy trial (or any trial), or the right to defend themselves; they were not even allowed to see the evidence against them. Only 8% of the boys and men imprisoned at Guantánamo were captured on a battlefield. Instead, they were captured in markets, taken from their homes, often turned in by neighbors or acquaintances who were enticed by flyers distributed by the U.S. military that advertised generous bounties for turning over people who might be "associated" with terrorists. Many of the detainees were essentially kidnapped and turned over to the U.S. military. The hundreds of detainees at the detention camp were allowed no visits with family members, no contact with the Red Cross, heard no formal charges against them, were afforded no opportunity to answer to charges, and offered no hope of ever leaving.
The Guantánamo disaster continued under President Obama, despite his promise to close the prison. By mid 2013, apparently having given up hope of ever being released despite being cleared of any terrorism charges by the U.S. Government, most of the remaining prisoners engaged in a prisonwide hunger strike. The U.S. military response was to push a tube through the detainees’ noses and down their throats and force-feed them a liquid diet.8

This protracted international disappointment represents one of many victories of fear over freedom. Additional ongoing victories for fear are embodied in the form of the USA PATRIOT Act.9 Hastily passed by a nervous Congress only 45 days after 9/11, the PATRIOT Act implied through its name that if you did not support and willingly comply with the repressive laws making up the Act, you did not love your country. The act was the first of many changes to surveillance laws that made it easier for the government to spy on any American citizen with newly expanded authority to monitor phone calls and email messages, collect bank and credit records, track Americans’ usage of the Internet, obtain individual borrower library records, even search homes without telling the occupants.

On May 26, 2011, the US Congress passed a four-year extension of the act and President Obama signed it.

How did we get here? How did optimism turn to fear, relative harmony in international relations to multiple wars, and relatively high regard by the international community to distrust? In her book The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism, Naomi Klein10 describes a process whereby a nation is so traumatized by a disaster—war, earthquake, market meltdown, terrorist attack—that the entire population finds itself in a state of collective shock. Government is increasingly influenced by corporatists—those who favor the transfer of public wealth to private companies—who seek to profit from the collective trauma of catastrophes and use the events to engage in radical economic and social engineering.11 Klein argues that catastrophes in any part of the world constitute an “opportunity” for corporatists to enter the region and clean up only to privatize nearly every aspect of the rebuilding: demolishing public schools for private, sometimes for-profit charter schools; creating private, for-profit prisons; even privatizing security by hiring firms such as Blackwater12 to “keep order” in places like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Peacekeeping and law enforcement that used to be carried out by local authorities has become contracted to private mercenary armies operating both within and outside of the United States. The “opportunity” here is for a huge transfer of public wealth into corporate hands. These trends representing movement from publicly owned entities to the private, for-profit sector is in line with the neoliberal corporatist trends described in Chapter 1.

Klein’s description of the trauma after a catastrophe is useful to help us understand the state of collective shock experienced by Americans immediately after 9/11. People in a shocked state become weakened and beleaguered, Klein argues, and subsequently receptive to all kinds of tricks and takeovers they might otherwise resist. “The falling bombs, the bursts of terror, the pounding winds serve to soften up whole societies much as the blaring music and blows in the torture cells soften up prisoners. Like the terrorized prisoner who gives up the names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect.”13 This is what happened to the United States after 9/11. With the help of a news media that hardly questioned the justification to invade Iraq in 2003,14 or the rash passage of the PATRIOT Act,15 we find that in the weeks and months after 9/11 Americans found themselves in a state in which the fear of another terrorist attack was greater than the fear of living in a society with restricted rights, hyper-surveillance, indefinite imprisonment, and drone killings of American citizens. Americans traditionally expect and cherish a right to privacy, freedom of speech, and freedom from intrusions from the federal government into private lives. In his many post-9/11 declarations, President George W. Bush linked these freedoms to American vulnerability to terrorist attack and in the name of the ongoing war on terror these freedoms were swiftly abridged. A New York Times/CBS News poll16 in December of 2001, three months after the attacks, found that 80% of Americans supported indefinite detention for noncitizens who were deemed a threat to national security; 70% favored government monitoring of conversations between suspected terrorists and their lawyers; 64% favored allowing the president the authority to change wiretaps guaranteed by the Constitution—tactics that many Americans would likely have opposed before 9/11. Tragically, indefinite detention, even of Americans, was codified into American law, not by President Bush but by President Obama when he signed the National Defense Authorization Act in January 2012.

Traditional Gender Roles: The New Old Normal

As the enormity of the attacks was unfolding, a narrative emerged in the media coverage of the event: and aftermath that holds many years later. That narrative includes the heroic rescuer—men, mostly white, and heterosexual—who were police officers, firefighters, EMTs, and other first responders. The necessary contrast to the heroic rescuer were the victims—women—mostly in the form of widowed wive of the men who perished in the attacks. Of course, in reality, many first responders were women and many men were widowed as a result of the attacks. However, in the days after the attacks, the master narrative that emerged in the media was of women as damsels-in-distress and men as heroic protectors.17
And now, years after the attacks, the iconic images of 9/11 provided by media fit this same frame.

In this traditional narrative of the masculinization of first responders and the ignoring of the women firefighters, police officers, and medical personnel, we witnessed the revitalization of the gendered "firemen" rather than the professional term, "firefighters." Using these outdated terms reflected the mass media gender narrative and at the same time reinforces and perpetuates this gendered arrangement. The graphic cartoon Our Towering Heroes likened the images of the twin towers of the World Trade Center to the bodies of two men—a firefighter and a police officer.

In her book, The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America, Susan Faludi describes the new gender role confines for women and men post-9/11. As women were relegated to the role of victims, the widowed women became repositories of grief. The post-9/11 United States was a defensive country eager to demonstrate its toughness and masculinity. Barbara Berg writes of the "rush to defend and bolster an American manhood compromised and belittled by the attacks." In the wake of the attacks, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and President George W. Bush were represented as tough-guy super heroes, as were New York firefighters, or rather, firemen.

The discourse of grief following the attacks suggests that it was mostly white, heterosexual families who had been torn apart by the attacks. Hidden in the news reports of the hijackings was the story of a gay man who had left behind "friends" (and not "family") in San Francisco. The media did not show images of these friends; rather we saw only his grieving mother. Also forgotten in this picture of heroes and victims were the nonwhite, working class women and men—cooks, dishwashers, mail handlers, janitors, and immigrant workers—who died at the Pentagon and World Trade Center that day. These images would be incongruent with the image of the "real" American, an image of white masculinity that was easy for Americans to rally around.

Soon after the attacks, the widows of 9/11 could be seen on the evening news and talk shows, whereas widowed men were, for the most part, invisible. The women survivors were celebrated as grieving wives and mothers, with the country projecting their fears, sadness, and sympathies onto these women. But as Susan Faludi argues, the 9/11 widows were shown sympathetically as long as they did not deviate from the constructed damsel-in-distress script provided for them by the media. When a group of 9/11 widows who became known as the "Jersey Girls" began to question the script—by asking questions critical of the Bush Administration and its handling of the aftermath of the attacks—they were marginalized in the press in favor of more easily digestible traditional women.

Likewise, the documentary Women at Ground Zero, about women rescue workers, was criticized as anti-male and anti-American because it did not follow the script of men as rescuers/women as victims and dazed to put women first-responders at the center for a moment. Women firefighters and police officers not only battled the 9/11 attacks but also were under attack from a society that views them as trespassing men's domain. These women were under attack from some of their male coworkers who sabotaged them by draining their oxygen tanks and making death threats. An article on the CNN website about its documentary, "Beyond Bravery: The Women of 9/11," generated hostile comments from readers on the CNN website. One reader writes, "I find this article almost offensive, really. Fighting for recognition as women? Seriously? Why is this about men and women?" Another reader says, "Are you kidding me? Come on, this is ridiculous, women always think they have it worse then[sc] men." These comments reflect the notion of the center-stage problem we will examine in Chapter 4. When attention is turned away from the majority (and thus legitimate) group, however briefly, the attention is interpreted as a takeover of the majority group by the encroaching minority group. These reader comments also reflect the fiction of a level playing field; a fiction that the playing field is equal and only becomes destabilized when women and minorities attempt to gain some ostensibly undeserved and unearned advantage.

Dealing with Dissent

Dissent was one of the first casualties of the war on terror. Shortly after the attacks commentators and celebrities who were critical of U.S. policies toward Arab and Muslim countries were shunned in the national press. Bill Maher lost his television show Politically Incorrect in 2002 after he questioned the script that prescribed the 9/11 terrorists as cowards. Like the treatment of the Jersey Girls—those 9/11 widows that questioned the gendered script—women critics seemed to have gotten the worst of it. According to Susan Faludi, a particular kind of fury was directed at women writers and commentators such as Susan Sontag, Katha Pollitt, and Fran Lebowitz, who dared question U.S. policy. They were labeled traitorous, idiotic, and haughty. Both Faludi and Barbara Berg note that the presence of women op-ed writers and broadcast pundits decreased shortly after September 11. Women who did appear were anti-feminist commentators such as Kate O’Beirne, Christina Hoff Sommers, Peggy Noonan, and Camille Paglia.

The crushing of dissent continued through the invasion of Iraq. When country music stars the Dixie Chicks criticized President Bush in 2003, they faced boycotts from radio stations and even death threats in this new environment that
was intolerant of dissent. In the weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq—a time when our country should have been vigorously debating the merits of invading a country that had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks—conservative pro-war voices were almost exclusively heard on TV. Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) conducted a study of nightly news stories about Iraq on ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS in the weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. FAIR found that 76% percent of all sources on these programs were current or former government officials—no political scientists, historians, Iraqis, anti-war activists, religious leaders, or veterans not working for the government. On the four major networks combined, just one of 267 U.S. sources was affiliated with antiwar activism—less than half a percent. This coverage occurred at a time when 61% of U.S. respondents were telling pollsters that an invasion of Iraq was premature and more time was needed for diplomacy with Iraq. Overall, only 17% of the total on-camera sources represented skeptical positions on the U.S. war policy. Thus, even when a majority of Americans were skeptical of the invasion of Iraq, the media presented the invasion as justified and inevitable. There was virtually no space for alternative points of view.

Once the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq began, the media had another type of woman to grapple with—one who did not fit the damsels-in-distress script: the woman soldier. How did the media fit women GI’s into a master narrative of retrograde roles for women? To the extent that women fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq were covered by news media, their role as wives and mothers was emphasized. Like the Jersey Girls, women who disturbed the script, when they weren’t vilified or invisible, were reconceived and reconstructed into a traditional gender narrative: primarily wives and mothers. Like women firefighters, women in the military were fighting battles on two fronts: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the war against them by men in the military who saw women not as comrades but as targets for sexual assault. Enlisted women face higher levels of sexual assault than non-enlisted women and most of the assaults are perpetrated by the men they work with. Rape occurs in the military nearly twice as often as in the civilian world, and rates of sexual assault are even higher during war. A 2013 Pentagon report estimated that 26,000 active duty soldiers (both women and men) were sexually assaulted the previous year—an average of about 70 assaults each day. Women who reported such violence to their commanding officers were often forced to take a lie detector test and continue to work with the perpetrators when nothing further was done about the crime. The post 9/11 veneration of the American male soldier makes criticism of the military unacceptable.

In the post-9/11 context, feminist discussions were denied and marginalized, placed on indeterminate hold, as other discussions such as killing terrorists were deemed more serious and of greater importance. In this context, bringing up gender issues is seen as a sign of disloyalty. Civil rights become an extravagance that the country cannot afford during wartime. These post-9/11 trends illustrate the quickness with which progress toward civil rights and equality became subverted as the country returned to traditional patriarchal patterns of men as breadwinners/heroes and women as homemakers/moms. It is almost as if in the amount of time it took the Twin Towers to fall, much of the progress from the women’s movement was pushed aside for the safety, comfort, and reassuring veneer of “old-fashioned” patriarchal values. When the country is under siege and at war, progressive politics and civil rights are easily dismissed as capricious luxuries that distract from constructed core values of masculine protector and female victim.

One constituency of women that was tolerated was the “security mom.” By 2004 when President George W. Bush ran for reelection, “security moms”—women identified as mothers concerned about the safety of their children and the country—were constructed by the media as a serious constituency for presidential candidates to court. And then by 2008, the “Mama Grizzly,” inspired by Sarah Palin’s vice-presidential run, served the same purpose. Tough, fiercely protective women, but tough in a mommymy way.

The atmosphere of war shapes voters’ attitudes about women and men as candidates for political office. Military and foreign policy issues had not played much of a central role in recent U.S. political campaigns prior to 2001. That changed after 9/11. In one sample, 80% of respondents reported that foreign policy was an “important” or “very important” issue determining vote choice. This view was the norm regardless of the gender, race, or political affiliation of the respondent. In peace time, women are about as likely as men to win elections, but not during war. People tend to believe that men candidates are better at dealing with military issues than are women. In the time after 9/11 people tended to believe that men would be more competent at punishing those responsible for 9/11 and would be more able to protect the nation from future attacks.

Since 1937 national random samples have answered the question, “If your political party nominated a woman for president, would you be willing to vote for her if she were qualified for the job?” The majority of Americans were unwilling to vote for a woman in the 1930s and 1940s, but levels of support increased throughout the next several decades. By the late 1990s, about 95% of those surveyed expressed willingness to vote for a woman candidate. In fact, because the question produced such a high percentage of agreement, it was dropped by the pollsters in 2000. A different survey in 2002, however, found that only 65% of respondents would be willing to vote for a woman for president.
part of the reason that overall willingness to elect a woman president in 2002 was as low as it was in the early 1970s.63

Recognition of the women heroes of 9/11 and its aftermath by feminists did little to shake up the pervasive imagery of masculine men in uniform storming up the stairs of the World Trade Center and construction crews (made up entirely of men) digging through dusty rubble in search of bodies. There was a parallel imagery of sorrowful widows, but that too turned out to be a false image of helplessness when the women became an aggressive activist group. Another activist group was the lesbian and gay partners of those who died on 9/11. They sued to be recognized as family members by the federal September 11 Victim Compensation Fund.64 The conventional categories and familiar roles convey stability in times of crisis, so it looks as though "men fight and women weep." But the reality is that in this disaster, as in many others, women can be on the frontlines, and men cry—even if their tears are off camera.

Managing Mortality during Terror Attacks

In the aftermath of 9/11 political attitudes shifted to the right with Americans becoming significantly more conservative following the attacks. This shift occurred among self-identified liberals, moderates, and conservatives. The most pronounced shifts were seen when people were asked their opinion of George W. Bush and the military.65 Terror management theory is based on the idea that individuals grapple with two human characteristics—the instinct for self-preservation and the knowledge that one’s death is inevitable. Humans deal with this existential terror by developing cultural institutions and worldviews that provide them meaning and explanation of this conflict. Culture and institutions, such as the family, religion, and nation, provide security and the sense that membership in these institutions can transcend death. People are motivated to defend their culture, their values, and their worldview—against real and imagined challenges alike. Hundreds of studies on terror management find that when people are made aware of the inevitability of their own deaths, that is, when their mortality is made salient, they experience a need to reinforce strong attachment to faith in their beliefs.66 Terror management theory then predicts that when people are faced with actual or symbolic mortality they cling tightly to their worldviews; they derogate those who are perceived to threaten their worldview; and in a leap from internal thought process to large-scale social and political practice, they support leaders that make them feel safe. The mere existence of differing points of view or diverse opinions raises the possibility that one’s own views could be misguided or wrong. To avoid consciously recognizing that their own opinions could be wrong, people disparage the views of the others by questioning others’ values, motives, integrity, and intelligence. In times of crisis, dissent is dealt with harshly.67

The terror attacks of 9/11 serve as a gigantic mortality salience experience. The deaths, the destruction of buildings, and the obliteration of perceived and actual cherished symbols (World Trade Center, American Airlines and United Airlines planes used in the attacks) severely destabilized the functional integrity of the psychological protection that usually enables us to feel protected and safe in a world where the only real certainty in life is death. If we look at the events in the days, weeks, and months after 9/11 in the context of terror management, we see a lot of clinging to the familiar and disparaging of the unfamiliar. Terror management theory explains in part why men, but not women, who were first responders were elevated as heroes and why women, but not men, were pictured in need of rescue. In times of crisis, this constructed gender arrangement feels comfortable and consistent with many individuals’ values and worldviews. Terror management theory also explains why dissenters were harshly punished in media, and why those who criticized U.S. policy were quashed. Especially women dissenters. The post-9/11 conservative climate alongside traditional gender roles that call for women to be not too opinionated produced an intolerance of women critical of the U.S. government. In times of terror, people look for strong (male) leaders to help them feel safe. A 2005 study found that when thoughts of death were primed, support for President George W. Bush increased and support for the 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry decreased; in the control condition—when death thoughts were not primed—attitudes were the opposite.68 Trust in the federal government (and state and local) increased immediately after the attacks. This change was especially likely for white women and men but it did occur to a lesser extent for African American women and men (other ethnicities were not examined). After about six months, attitudes returned to pre-9/11 opinions.69

The retreat to traditional gender roles is consistent with a nation reminded of its symbolic and literal mortality. One way people manage their anxiety about mortality is by identifying with and supporting those in power who make them feel like they are a valued part of something larger than themselves. When mortality is made salient, people adhere to values that give them comfort. One experiment60 on the evaluation of leaders found that when men were made to think of death (compared to something less threatening), they preferred a male leader who was assertive, decisive, and independent, whereas women preferred a leader of either gender with those characteristics. Another study61 found that mortality salience increased adherence to cultural gender stereotypes such that people
favored women job candidates who were applying to be a fashion writer and men candidates who were applying for a sports writer position over applicants applying for the counterstereotype positions. When people are reminded of their mortality, they seek to confirm the validity of their cultural worldviews.

Correspondingly, mortality salience produces especially punitive reactions to perceived moral transgressions. For example, one study found that municipal court judges assigned far greater penalties to prostitutes after a brief reminder of their own deaths, compared to judges not reminded of death. And when mortality salience is induced, men report more negative feelings toward a "seductive" woman versus a "wholesome" woman (same woman, just presented differently) and they recommended a more lenient sentence for a perpetrator of male to female violence compared to male-male violence. Thus, in the post-9/11 context, women in the military, women firefighters, feisty widows, and "unwholesome" women present a problem for people. As we will explore in Chapter 5, nontraditional women are always a problem for people, but especially in times of crisis and uncertainty. Terror management theory allows us to understand why dissent was punished so harshly and why so many Americans, though certainly not all, seemed to tolerate the incursion on civil and human rights post-9/11.

Terror management would also predict the post-9/11 increases in hate crimes against Muslims, or those thought to be Muslim (or Arab or Middle Eastern). People who are different from "us" are also dealt with harshly by the majority as a result of heightened concerns about death. Mortality salience leads to increased prejudice and stereotyping. The mere existence of those who are different from us is threatening in that the validity of our own death-transcending cultural worldview is or can be questioned. When people need protection from anxiety, which is the case when they have been reminded of their mortality, there is a tendency to stereotype and reject those who are different from themselves. Interestingly, whereas the endorsement of violence in general did not increase after 9/11, the endorsement of violence through war, as well as endorsement of violence toward people who break the law, did increase after 9/11. These attitudes began to return to the original baseline rates within a year after the attacks. Did these changes in attitudes make it easier to accept the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq? Or perhaps the invasion of Afghanistan influenced these pro-war attitudes.

Post-9/11 Retro Trends

In the weeks and months after 9/11 reporters and pundits commented on the return to traditional values. There were articles, for instance, about single women who had placed careers ahead of matrimony but now were said to be looking for husbands. Regardless of whether these reports reflected actual trends or simply anecdotes that resonated with the post-9/11 traditional gender frame, these reports circulated nonetheless. In support of these trends, women in the late 2000s were actually found to be more likely to change their names to their husband's last name after marriage than women in the 1990s. Media reported on the post-9/11 "nesting" trend by which people stayed home and avoided travel—taking "staycations" rather than vacations. There were even reports of a post-9/11 trend in American cooking: "comfort food"—traditional food characteristic of the 1950s such as meatloaf, macaroni and cheese, and mashed potatoes. Of course, comfort food in this context is not universal but is raced and classed; it refers to the old timey food characteristics of middle-class whites. Collard greens, tamales, and pork buns are not included on the post-9/11 comfort food menu. Although there appeared to be no actual link between sales of meatloaf and mashed potatoes and 9/11, many in the media made explicit the link between comfort food and 9/11, even if it was not real. These reports are consistent with the prediction from a terror management perspective that in uncertain times Americans gravitate toward the familiar, a hardening back to a (supposedly) simpler time. Even if the simpler times of the "good old days" of the 1950s didn't actually exist, and certainly did not exist for communities of color in the pre-civil-rights-movement era, comfort food symbolizes this ostensibly simpler, familiar, more predictable time.

In the several years after 9/11 you still see retro trends. A 2009 article titled "Comfortably Yum: In Times of Uncertainty, Comfort Food Makes a Comeback" still refers to 9/11 but also references job loss and recession as factors in the attraction of comfort food. Beginning with the 2005 revival of the Ford Mustang, there has been a resurgence of 1960s-era American-made muscle cars such as the Camaro, Challenger, GTO, and Charger. These vehicles represent an earlier time, a stronger and more masculine time, and an era that was also more profitable for the U.S. auto industry and the U.S. more generally. It is ironic that these low-gas-mileage muscle cars resurfaced while the debate about peak oil and global warming was occurring. Retro television shows became popular by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. In 2007, the television show Mad Men, about the white, heterosexual, male-dominated world of Madison Avenue "ad men" in the 1960s, became a hit. Riding the retro wave clothing company Banana Republic introduced their Mad Men collection in 2011. Inspired by the television show, the collection offered consumers sophisticated dressing from the early 1960s. The women's collection offered "ladylike pieces" such as "feminine lace shell blouses and chic coral cropped capris" and tight dresses that accentuate the sexy secretary style so common in 1960s film (if not in real life). The styles
for professional women stand in stark contrast to the more tailored men's styled business attire women wore in, say, the 1980s. Back by popular demand, Banana Republic debuted its second collection of Mad Men styles in time for the 2012 season premiere of the television show. The attire inspired by Mad Men has different implications for feminism and women than the actual television show. The TV show offered the viewer a critique of the sexism, racism, and homophobia of the advertising industry and the culture of the 1960s dealing with issues such as segregation, abortion, and rape. The ladylike pieces from Banana Republic offer the hyperfeminine looks of the time without the critique of how women were treated in the workplace and how women were limited in their choices between the bored housewife of Mad Men's Betty Draper or the vixen working woman Joan Holloway.

For the 2011 television season networks introduced retro shows such as The Playboy Club about the early days of Hugh Hefner's men's clubs in the 1960s, and Pan Am, a retro look at flight attendants ("stewardesses") in the early days of Pan American Airlines. The actual Playboy clubs that were scattered about the United States in the 1960s that showcased bunny-eared, cotton-tailed, corseted young women as hosts and servers closed its remaining club in 1986 when the tenor of the times changed. However, by 2006, a Playboy club opened in Las Vegas, followed by openings in London and other cities. By 2011 there were plans to reopen the club in Chicago close to the original Playboy Club. Apparently, in the post-9/11 world, the time was ripe to relaunch this gender throwback replete with its stylized retro trappings.

On the Lifetime television network, the program Army Wives premiered in 2007. Its sixth season began in 2012. This present-day drama follows the lives of four army wives and one army husband. It is different from Mad Men, The Playboy Club, and Pan Am, in that it is based on the present, not on the past, when gender roles were more rigid and women's options were more limited than they are today. However, at a time when the United States was active in two wars and enlisted women's military service was relatively normalized, it is a revealing choice to create a show focused on the wives and families of enlisted men.

In her analysis of "chick-flick" films that came out after 9/11, Diane Negra finds that women characters in these films are encouraged to find love over career, or to the extent that the main character keeps her career, it becomes privatized—she begins to work at home, for instance. Negra argues that these post-feminist qualities in chick flicks were already in play in the years immediately before 9/11; however, they were given new traction after 9/11 because they were consistent with the discourse that advocated traditionalism as the appropriate response to the new conservative national climate. Negra contends, "the post-9/11 cultural climate emphasized the re-essentialization of gender as a panacea for the doubt, confusion, sadness, and anger that marked national life." Another curious phenomenon of the post-9/11 era is the purity ball. Purity balls correspond to the popularity of abstinence-only education of the George W. Bush era. The first purity ball was held in 1998, but the phenomenon became popularized and prevalent in the United States in the early and mid 2000s. One source reports that 4,000 purity events took place in the United States in 2007. The purity ball centers on maintaining the purity of girls and young women until marriage. Daughters pledge their virginity to their fathers at these ceremonies, which resemble something of a wedding, a prom, and a debutante ball. The website purityball.com sponsored by The Christian Center enthuses, "God thinks the protection of a woman's purity should be extravagant and so do we!" These events usually include a formal dinner, dance, pictures with father and daughter(s), and some kind of ceremony during which the father pledges to his daughter, "I will be pure in my own life as a man, husband, and father." "I will be a man of integrity and accountability as I lead, guide and pray over my daughter and my family as the High Priest in my home." Daughters in turn pledge their moral, physical, and sexual purity to their fathers until they are able to transfer the commitment from their fathers to the man they will marry. The ball usually culminates in prayer and the signing of a purity pledge or the presentation of a purity ring given by father to daughter (that she wears on her left hand). Many critics' reports of these events describe them as "creepy"—an article in Maclean's is titled, "Dad's your prom date." That the girls and young women wear prom-like attire—spaghetti straps and heels—and their fathers wear suits or tuxedos is a confusing positioning of girls wearing feminine and even revealing attire—designed to attract suitors—at an event during which she pledges to her father her commitment to virginity until marriage.

There is much to criticize about purity events such as the reification of the father being in charge of a daughter's purity until he gives her away to another man. The father gives permission to the new man to have sex with her: women are first the property of fathers and then the property of husbands, and female honor rests with male protectors. There is also the extreme gender essentialism and absurd sexual double standard that says a young woman's "purity" is more important than a young man's. What about boys' and young men's purity? What are they up to while their same-aged female peers are pledging their purity to their fathers and God? Of course the assumption of heterosexuality as the only normal type of relationship option is implicit in these events. Where do young lesbians fit in these events and this discourse? The websites showcasing these events appear to be events exclusively for white girls and their fathers. Do young women of color have a chance at purity as well? Probably not because, as
discussed in Chapter 1, stereotypes about African American women, for example, have branded them as hypersexual and therefore their purity is impossible or irrelevant.74

On a more practical note, the message preached at these events is sexual abstinence. As we know after considerable study of abstinence-only education programs in schools, preaching abstinence has significant negative outcomes for its pupils. Analyses of abstinence-only programs demonstrate a profound disconnect between intention and practice on the part of young people. Abstinence-only education programs are associated with higher than average teenage pregnancy and birth rates in the United States. In contrast, the lowest teen pregnancy rates are from those programs that provide comprehensive sex education, covering abstinence alongside proper contraception, condom use, and HIV prevention.75 What about the young women who take purity pledges? In a five-year longitudinal study of U.S. adolescents comparing those who took a virginity pledge and teens who did not, those who pledged virginity were just as likely to engage in premarital sex and had just as many sexually transmitted diseases as those teens who did not make a virginity pledge. However, those teens who took pledges were significantly less likely to use birth control and condoms than those who did not take a virginity pledge.76 Unfortunately, the function of a virginity pledge seems to be to create an environment of ignorance and complacency that results in reckless behavior. And purity balls are certainly consistent with other retro trends that function to bring women back to an earlier and controlled time.

Conclusion

The previous chapter explored the features of anti-feminism in a post-feminist era. This chapter explores the role of 9/11 in a retreat to gender traditionalism that has occurred in the decade since 9/11, influenced by the reaction to the terror attacks of 9/11. The events of 9/11 did not introduce a brand new set of norms and agendas. Rather, 9/11 enhanced and accelerated a conservative agenda already in place in the United States. The attacks afforded an opportunity to make this post-feminist agenda palatable to more Americans. Like the post-feminist trends described in Chapter 1, this process began in the early 1980s, not on September 12, 2001. The neoliberal agenda ushered in by Ronald Reagan was allowed to flourish after the trauma of 9/11. Given the gravity of the event, no good American would question this new reality, or what Barbara Berg calls, the new old normal.77

The collective shock experienced by a nation during a crisis makes possible large movements of privatizing public institutions and curtailing constitutional rights—in the post-9/11 context these are seen as shared sacrifices for the good of winning the war on terror. Progressive politics become viewed as capricious extravagances that distract from killing terrorists. But the sacrifice is not shared equally. Women are relegated to the home and are punished for speaking out. Part of the corporatist agenda is to cut back and deregulate. The first responders of 9/11 were constructed as heroes in the news media. But when they got sick it took Congress nearly 10 years for the government to formally recognize that the toxins at Ground Zero of the World Trade Center caused illness and death in the workers and to pass a law that would cover health care costs for first responders. When the bill finally came to a vote in 2010, 41 of 42 Republican Senators voted against it. So politicians were quick to use 9/11 responders and their bravery when they were constructing a rationale to invade Iraq and Afghanistan and rolling back civil rights, but then abandoned those same heroes when they became vulnerable and ill. This shameful paradox prompted The Daily Show's Jon Stewart to say, "You know what Republicans? You use 9/11 so much, if you don't owe 9/11 first responders health care, at least you owe them royalties."78

In Chapter 1, we explored some key aspects of post-feminism such as consumerism, neoliberalism, privatization, and hypersexualization under the auspices of choice and empowerment for women. The mainstreaming of pornography and the hypersexualization of girls and women might at first glance seem incongruous with the retrograde trends described in this chapter. In fact, both pressures on and constructions of women represented in these two chapters work in concert to marginalize women and to relegate them to traditional gender roles. In the case of "empowerment" through self-objectification described in Chapter 1, women are offered "choices" through their ability to purchase consumer goods with their own incomes (middle-class women, at least). However, the range of their choices is confined to being sexually appealing to others. There is little room for actual sexual pleasure and agency, unless agency is measured by your ability to make yourself look hot. One of the contributions of the feminist movement of the 1970s was women's control over their own bodies—to have sexual intercourse without coercion, without the fear of pregnancy, and for pleasure, to be able to terminate a pregnancy, and to be able to have children by choice. In post-feminism, women are encouraged to be sexually appealing, but there is little discourse of women's own sexual agency and pleasure. Being sexy is not the same as being sexual. And spinning on a pole for others' pleasure is not the same as choosing sexual partners for a woman's own sexual pleasure, on her own terms.

The post-9/11 retreat to traditionalism is similarly confining and retrograde. A crisis like 9/11 demonstrates how tenuous civil rights and progressive gender politics are and how they can be pushed back. The result is the claim that women are best suited for playing the role of the helpless victim and when they resist, when they get mouthy, they are punished publicly—even more so than mouthy men. Sassy women violate traditional gender roles that prescribe women
as smiling and supportive and in the background. The focus on women as wives and mothers confines women into narrow, old-fashioned roles where agency and empowerment take the form of cooking comfort food and being a “mama grizzly.”

The constructions of women in both chapters are retrograde and objectifying, just in different ways. There are always tensions in cultural tropes—seemingly contradictory stereotypes and roles, but they are roles that work together and help define each other: virgin/whore, mammy/jezebel, lotus blossom/dragon lady. These dimensions often undergird each other. They are two sides of the same sexist coin. Rather than women being divided into these two contradictory roles that we have seen historically, today’s post-feminist woman is likely to feel pressure to be both. The post-feminist woman takes pole-dancing classes at the gym and gets home in time to make macaroni and cheese for her husband. That might seem doubly oppressive, but post-feminism tells women that these roles reflect freecom—she is “free” to put on an apron and cook mash potatoes and is “free” to take off that apron and twirl around a pole.

Notes

12. Because of its tarnished reputation, Blackwater changed its name to Xe Services, and then changed its name again to Academi.


THE END OF MEN AND THE BOY CRISIS

This whole sort of war on women thing, I'm scratching my head, because if there was a war on women, I think they won... In fact, I worry about our young men sometimes, because I think the women really are outcompeting men in our world.


In 1982 feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan published her landmark book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* The 1980s and early 1990s were marked by a surge of scholarship and activism related to girls' and women's development and educational opportunities. A 1992 report from the American Association of University Women entitled *How Schools Shortchange Girls,* and Myra and David Sadker's *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls,* critiqued the decades and centuries-long focus on boys and men in the educational domain. Mary Pipher's 1994 *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* looked at the marginalization of girls relative to boys in a variety of domains. Almost immediately this brief and still intermittent attention paid to girls' and women's needs was met with resistance. These works on girls and women were and continue to be viewed as a takeover, an emblem of feminism having gone too far. By the 1990s, the anti-feminist response constituted a massive recovery effort to bring boys and men back to the center, and this effort has not relented since. These "boy crisis" books are represented by, for instance, the well-intentioned *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood,* by William Pollack in 1998, and Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson's 1999 *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys.* Anti-feminist Michael Gurian produced book after book on the subject, beginning with *The Wonder of Boys* in 1996. Anti-feminist boy-crisis trailblazer Christina Hoff Sommers helped solidify the industry with her 2000 *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men.* The main claim of these works is that feminism has gone too far and now boys and men are paying for it.

In the last chapter, we addressed the anti-feminist fiction that feminists are man-haters and male bashers. In this chapter, we examine another claim reflecting the belief that feminism has gone too far: that feminism has so empowered girls and women that they are now taking over and getting ahead of boys and men. Kathleen Parker is one of the anti-feminist conservative columnists at the center of this moral panic launching arguments that begin with, "America is a dangerous place for males these days." In her 2008 book, *Save the Males: Why Men Matter, Why Women Should Care,* Parker writes, "today's world is hostile toward men, who are no longer considered necessary for much of anything," and the first chapter of Parker's book is entitled, "Women Good, Men Bad." And while the United States ranks a miserable 47th in the world on gender equality—meaning there are 46 other countries in which men's advantage over women is less dramatic—we still see headlines claiming that women are surpassing men in all areas of society.

In this chapter we first address the claim that mass media and society have become antimal. Next, we address the supposed "boy crisis" in American schools—the belief that schools have become hostile to boys and biased in favor of girls. Finally, we consider the issue of male privilege and entitlement as one explanation of why boys and men tend to earn lower grades and pursue university studies in fewer numbers than girls and women.

Mass Media and the Marginalization of Men?
Is the Media Mean to Men?

Media scholars have documented the near invisibility of women and people of color in television and film for decades. But the feminism-gone-too-far wave has imagined a mass media that marginalizes men and boys. For example, Steve Biddulph, author of *Raising Boys: Why Boys Are Different—and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-Balanced Men,* says "The media continually portrays males as rapists, murderers, or inadequate fools. So a boy may easily feel quite bad about himself as a masculine being." These claims stand in stark contrast to the actual media representations of men that children encounter. It is true that men can be seen playing violent predators or incompetent buffoons. However, claims that there are uniformly negative representations of men are erroneous. In fact, there are many more representations of men and they are depicted in a wider range of behavior than are women characters. And in terms of negative portrayals of men, there are just as many men who play heroes as villains. In other words, because there is such a diversity of positive and negative roles, especially for white men, the negative portrayals of men are simply one way in which they are portrayed. As researchers of one study concluded: "male characters did more of almost everything than did the female characters, simply because they appeared more often."
Let's take a look at various genres of mass media to address the panic over the belief that women are taking over all the major institutions in society. Are women truly taking over mass media? In prime-time television women make up 45% of the regular characters. Patterns are more exaggerated in film. Major male characters in top-grossing films outnumber female characters by a huge 73% to 27%. When you consider the age of actors and characters, the representations of women are even bleaker. In both prime-time television and in popular films women are most frequently seen in the age range of 20 to 30, whereas men are more likely to be in their 30s and 40s. When you get into the 50s and 60s, women virtually disappear. This latter fact is particularly interesting because the largest percentage of women in the population is in the 51+ group. So the largest age demographic of women in real life is the least likely to be seen in celluloid life. There is another reason that the erasure of older women in television and film is significant in addition to the mismatch between representation in media and representation in real life. Typically, older adults on TV and in film have more power, status, and leadership, but this is true for men, not women. For example, in TV and film, men in their 40s and 50s are more likely to play leaders than younger men, and women in the same age range. Men in their 50s have greater occupational power than women in their 50s. So for men, as they get older they gain status and power; as women get older, they disappear—women disappear in terms of being shown on TV and film and they disappear in terms of their status, power, and significance as characters.

In terms of important and influential genres of TV and film there is a lot of work that still needs to be done regarding gender equality. Roles for men and stories about men continue to be the norm. As evidence, consider the use of the term chick flicks—those films dominated by women characters with storylines supposedly of interest to women more than men. Movies dominated by men, on the other hand, with characters and plots telling men's stories, are considered the norm and thus are not gender marked due to their supposed universal appeal. However, films that are thought to be of interest to women get the gender marking of "chick flick." This is similar to when films about heterosexuals are simply called films—they should resonate with everyone—but films with gay characters are marked, described as "gay films."

Disparity also exists in terms of occupational roles on television. Men are more likely than women to play criminals, but they are also more likely to be in professional roles, law enforcement roles, and in blue collar jobs. In contrast, women are more likely to not work, or their work is not known, conveying the message that being professionals with meaningful work outside the home is not a significant aspect of women's identity. This same pattern holds for both white and African American women (there are so few other people of color on TV, calculations are not available). Women characters on television continue to enact interpersonal roles involved with romance, family, and friends (emphasizing communal/expressive traits), whereas men characters are more likely to enact work-related roles (emphasizing the instrumental/agency traits of ambition and desire for success).

Is the picture so positive for all men, or only for white men? Anti-feminist writers and commentators who support this masculine recovery effort do not address race in their concerns about portrayals of men in the media. Their concerns lie with the disruption of the status quo, the supposed loss of status and influence of white heterosexual men. In fact, there is something to be concerned about when we do take into account how men of color are portrayed in the media: African American men continue to be portrayed as dangerous thugs. For instance, in television news African American men are overrepresented as criminal suspects and underestimated as victims of crime compared to actual crime statistics. The opposite is true of white men: they are underrepresented as perpetrators and overrepresented as victims. Thus, in their eagerness to keep white, heterosexual men at the center of society, the end-of-men/boy-crisis authors miss an opportunity to address a group that is actually marginalized and actually negatively portrayed in media representations—men of color.

In music videos, women are worse than marginal. Even though women have made progress in terms of their numbers as pop stars and musicians, the roles they play in music videos are as sexual objects used by men. Men outnumber women in music videos nearly three to one. Worse than the sheer lack of representation of women is the way they play when they do appear in videos. Women's chief role in music videos is as sexual objects that are denigrated and debased. They are pushed, grabbed, and slapped by men in videos. African American women are even more sexualized and abused than white women. What explains the lack of creativity and range in the roles that women play in music videos? One answer is the intertwining of pornography and music videos. Former pornographic film directors now can be found directing music videos and former porn stars can be found starring in them. This trend corresponds to the increased mainstreaming of pornography and hypersexual representations of girls and women described in Chapter 1.

There have been some changes in the representations of women and men in advertisements. In terms of role portrayals, women and men are more equal than in the 1960s. One study looked at 50 years of advertisements in popular U.S. magazines. The findings indicated that the traditional patterns of ads showing that a woman's place is in the home, and that women do not do important things or make important decisions, is less true than in previous decades. However, ads still show men as leaders and protectors, whereas women are shown in roles that
are dependent on men. And in the area of sexual objectification, portrayals are actually worse than they were in the 1960s. Women are more likely to be portrayed as sexual objects than they were previously. The female body and women’s dismembered body parts are used much more often than the male body as a visual element in ads. In this way, one can see how advertising has co-opted the feminist desire for sexual freedom described in Chapter 1. In print ads today men are still more likely to be shown in authoritative, superior, and more powerful positions than women, and women are depicted in more deferential positions to men. Even more puzzling and alarming, women are also more likely to be positioned in weakened psychological states, looking away, disoriented, and even looking dead or passed out—and these depictions have actually increased over the 50-year period. Magazines show ads depicting dead women from Marc Jacobs, Gucci, Lanvin, Jimmy Choo, and Louis Vuitton and ads depicting gang rape by Calvin Klein, Dolce & Gabbana, and Tom Ford. It is difficult to imagine what the end-of-men/boy-crisis authors have in mind when you see how women are depicted in advertisements.

In terms of television commercials men comprise 39% of the main characters in prime-time ads, whereas women make up 30% (about 1/3 contain both women and men). Roles played by women and men in U.S. television commercials are still highly gender-stereotyped. For example, 32% of women’s roles are as homemaker, but only 1% of men’s roles are as homemaker; 14% of the men in commercials are professionals (doctor, lawyer), but only 5% of women play these roles. Television voiceovers are an important feature of many commercials, as a narrator conveys authority, gravity, and wisdom. Women’s voices make up only 27% of commercial voiceovers compared to men’s 73%. Like most of the other media genres, television commercials convey the message that men are out in the world doing important things, and they are experts who should be listened to, whereas women tend to be relegated to the domestic sphere.

In newspaper comics, 61% of the characters are male and 28% of the characters are female (11% of the characters are animals, and male animals outnumber female animals 6 to 1). Women characters in comics are more than twice as likely to appear in the home and men characters are twice as likely to appear at work. Women characters are less likely to be identified as having a job, more likely to be married, and more likely to be taking care of children.

Even in clipart—those graphics that enhance workplace PowerPoint presentations—women characters are invisible or relegated to silly roles. Middle-aged white men are the most common characters in clipart. Like TV and film roles, men are depicted in a wider range of activities than women. Women are more likely to be portrayed as younger (e.g., teenagers) rather than older. Clipart images of men show them as more physically mobile and producing some product, whereas images depict women in passive positions such as sitting, reclining, or accompanying a man. When women are engaged in activity, they are more likely than men to be cleaning and taking care of children. The analysis of clipart images might, at first glance, appear to be trivial and of little consequence. However, if you consider where and when these images are used—in office and business settings—it becomes clear that these images are important. Professional women already have to battle gender discrimination in the form of pay inequality, sexual harassment, and the glass ceiling. Clipart images reinforce the notion that men are the professional norm, whereas women do not quite belong in the workplace the way that men do.

Men even dominate media coverage of “women’s issues.” In an analysis of 2012 election coverage, men were more likely to be quoted on their opinions in newspapers and on television. For example, in front page articles about the 2012 election that mention abortion, men were 81% of those quoted; on birth control, they were 75% of those quoted; on women’s rights, they were 52% of those quoted (women were only 31% of those quoted and organizations were 17%). Can you imagine the media seeking out women as the main experts on issues pertaining to men?

As this review of mass media portrayals of women and men demonstrates, women are hardly in the position of threatening the traditional domains of men. In every aspect of the mass media they are underrepresented compared to their actual numbers in the population. When women are seen, they are more likely to be portrayed as homemakers, as sexual objects, and as young. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be portrayed in a range of professional fields; they are more active, and they are older and portrayed with more power and influence.

**Is the Media Mean to Boys?**

Authors of end-of-men/boy-crisis books claim that the world is now geared toward girls. For instance, Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *The War Against Boys*, writes that feminis see boys’ masculinity as “politically incorrect.” Kathleen Parker, author of *Save the Males*, says “boys learn early that they belong to the ‘bad’ sex and their female counterparts to the ‘good.’” Parents even have been accused of leaping on the antiboy bandwagon, according to *The Atlantic* writer, Hannah Rosin. In her 2010 article “The End of Men,” Rosin reports that American couples are now preferring girls to boys when contemplating pregnancy. The belief in a preference for girls resonates with those who believe that feminism has gone too far, but that belief is false. American couples still prefer sons over daughters. When presented with the question, “Suppose you could only have one child. Would you prefer that it be a boy or a girl?” 37% of the respondents express a preference for a boy, and 28% for a girl.
Parents may still prefer boys, but does the mass media? Let's begin with children's television cartoons. Consistent with empirical studies over several decades, male cartoon characters continue to outnumber female characters. Some cartoon genres are extreme. For instance, in the traditional adventure genre (e.g., *Batman, Aladdin*) male characters outnumber female characters more than 4 to 1. In comedy cartoons (e.g., *Animaniacs*), males outnumber females 2 to 1. In nontraditional adventure series (e.g., *Sailor Moon, Reboot*), there is equal representation. How are females and males represented in TV cartoons? Anti-feminists are concerned that boys are being feminized and girlified, but this is not the case in TV cartoons. Male characters are portrayed in highly masculinized ways. They are more likely to engage in physical aggression and less likely to show fear than female characters. They are less likely to be supportive and polite, and less likely to be romantic, than female characters. Overall, despite Christina Hoff Sommers' and Kathleen Parker's concerns about traditional male gender roles being undermined by feminism and feminizing, cartoons are still rigidly gender stereotyped.

Has the content of cartoons changed over time? One study examined cartoons over a 60-year period. The representations of female and male characters have actually changed little. Females account for only 16% of all characters. Physical attractiveness was more important for female characters, whereas intelligence was more important for males. Male characters were 50% more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors; females were twice as likely as males to be considered "good." Over time, cartoons have contained fewer and fewer African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians, relative to their population numbers. Even in educational programs such as *Mr. Wizard's World, Beakman's World, Bill Nye the Science Guy*, and *Newton's Apple*, twice as many adult male scientists as female scientists were shown. Fully 79% of the female characters that did appear were relegated to secondary roles such as helpers.

When the content of children's picture books has been examined, we find nearly twice as many male as female main characters, and female characters are more likely to be portrayed inside the home and without a paid occupation. Furthermore, these representations have not changed over time. Males are even more common in children's coloring books. A study of 56 coloring books found that 59% of the characters were male and 41% were female. Children were more likely to be females (58%) than males (42%), adults were more likely to be male (78%) than female (22%).

Toy commercials on television reinforce these patterns. Although content analysis of 455 commercials appearing on the network *Nickelodeon* found that commercials were more likely to be oriented toward girls (34%) than boys (27%), this hardly represents a girl takeover. Boys in commercials are shown in a wider range of interactions (e.g., competitive, cooperative, independent) than girls. And like other media genres featuring both adults and children, girls were once again more likely to be located inside the home. That commercials depicting boys showed them in a variety of settings implies that they have more opportunities and are involved in more action. So boys are doing stuff. One commercial for *Silly 6 Pins* has boys bowling and girls cheering them on, laying on the ground watching.* Can you imagine the roles in reverse? Girls bowling while boys lay on the ground cheering them on the sidelines?

You even see unequal gender representations on cereal boxes. In an analysis of 217 cereal boxes, male characters outnumbered female characters by more than 2 to 1. Similar to other genres, animal characters are more likely to be male than female. Like children's coloring books, authority figures (e.g., adults) were more likely to be men than women and children were more likely to be girls than boys, thus suggesting that females are more dependent on others and are less powerful. Unlike research in other areas of media representation, there were no gender differences in activity level and passivity.

It is clear from this exhaustive (and exhausting) review of the literature on media representation that boys are not marginal, nor are they denigrated. Boys are portrayed as the gender that matters, that gets things done; boys are the default, the norm. These patterns from empirical research studies contradict what the boy-crisis authors say about society's view of boys. Let's take a look at what Steve Biddulph, author of the 1998 book *Raising Boys* says:

In an era when men are often targets of ridicule in the media, it's important to remember (and to show boys) that men built the planes, fought the wars, laid the railroad tracks, invented the cars, built the hospitals, invented the medicines and sailed the ships that made it all happen. There's an African saying, 'Women hold up half the sky.' But, clearly, men hold up the other half.

This statement reflects the upside down world of men-are-marginalized rhetoric you see from the boy-crisis authors. From Biddulph's perspective, men have been so erased from history and the present that we actually need to remind boys of men's accomplishments. His invented "era" of male erasure gives him permission to gratuitously reassert male dominance (men are the ones, after all, "who made it all happen") while pretending to apply a much-needed remedy to a perceived girl takeover.
Are Schools Antiboy?

Authors and commentators who claim a boy crisis argue that, even more than the media, schools are the main repositories of antiboy elements. Their focus on education is, in part, a response to the progress of Title IX—the 1972 statute prohibiting gender discrimination in educational institutions—and to the deliberate efforts of feminist educators to make schools hospitable to girls.

Content and Curricula: Are Boys Invisible?

William Pollack in his book Real Boys writes, "Our schools, in general, are not sufficiently hospitable environments for boys and are not doing what they could to address boys' unique social, academic, and emotional needs" because "they use curricula, classroom materials, and teaching methods that do not respond to how boys learn." Kathleen Parker, author of Save the Males, also claims that classes and curricula "favor girl interests." She says, "Elementary grade textbooks and literature rarely feature strong, active male roles or tales of valor, high adventure, or heaven forbid, gallantry, which feminists view as implying that men and women aren't equal. Biographies of presidents and inventors have been replaced by stories of brave and adventurous women." Christina Hoff Sommers says that boys are forced to learn about Jane Eyre, when instead they should learn about Silas Marner and the war poets.

Do classroom materials privilege girls and marginalize boys? Let's take the content of textbooks. There are more male (54%) than female (46%) characters in first and third grade children's developmental reading texts. Males are more likely to be portrayed as aggressive, argumentative, and competitive. Females are more likely to be described as affectionate, emotionally expressive, passive, and tender. These gender-stereotyped depictions should please Sommers and Parker for their total lack of creativity and their strict adherence to traditional gender roles.

Much has been made in the last two decades about getting girls more interested in math and science. Unfortunately, school materials do little to encourage girls' interest in these fields. Like most materials, life science textbooks show pictures of males more often than females, males are positioned in active roles more frequently than females, and the accomplishments of women are less likely to be featured. High school chemistry textbooks also show more pictures of males than females. These depictions offer few role models for girls aspiring to be scientists. When early and more recent editions of high school chemistry texts have been examined, we find that most maintain a gender imbalance favoring representations of boys and men compared to girls and women, and a few have even increased the imbalance in recent years. The patterns found in science textbooks send the message to readers that boys and men are engaged in the scientific endeavor, whereas girls and women are on the sidelines—they are not doing science so much as watching and observing those who are.

Even educational software favors boys and men. In a study of 43 popular educational software programs, 20 programs contained only male main characters but only 5 programs contained only female characters. These numbers also reveal the gender-segregated nature of these software programs, which sends the message to young people that male and female characters inhabit different lives and gender cultures. Male characters were more likely to be shown as aggressive but also more athletic, more likely to rescue, and more likely to take risks than female characters. Once again, educational software depicts boys and men as active, involved, and mattering more than girls and women.

Even teaching materials are gender biased in favor of boys. In an analysis of teacher education texts (texts used by those studying to become teachers), the content focuses mostly on males, although unlike the findings from other studies reviewed in this chapter, photos depict more females than males. The presence of females compared to males might suggest progress but the photos tended to show women as teachers and men as principals and administrators which only solidifies traditional gender roles. If there is any field in which women have made significant contributions, it would be education. Yet the pioneers of education shown in these texts are nearly all male.

In this exhaustive review of educational materials, the only literature found with some gender balance or counter-stereotyped content was one study of 15 popular educational psychology textbooks. The study analyzed student characters in classroom scenarios depicted in the texts. Girl and boy characters were presented at roughly the same frequency. Surprisingly, there were no gender differences found in portrayals of positive masculine traits (e.g., courage, confidence) or positive (e.g., nurturing, caring) or negative (submissiveness, emotionality) feminine traits. However, boys were portrayed as engaging in more negative masculine activities (e.g., aggression, bullying).

In contrast to the concerns of anti-feminist authors, an avalanche of research studies demonstrates that school materials overwhelmingly present males as the typical, normal student by portraying them more frequently than females. The content of materials caters to traditional boys' interests; boys are the active characters in these materials and girls provide marginal, largely supportive roles; and gender roles are traditional.

Are Teachers Mean to Boys?

Several writers express concern about the overinfluence of women in boys' lives. In her book Women Who Make the World Worse, anti-feminist Kate O'Beirne...
argues that "Classrooms have been turned into feminist reeducation camps..."

Most often women teachers are presented as the ones to blame for boys losing interest in school, boys not doing well, and even boys feeling marginalized as boys. In *Raising Cain*, Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson lament: "a boy's experience of school is as a thorn among roses; he is a different, lesser, and sometimes frowned-upon presence, and he knows it," and "Grade school is largely a feminine environment, populated predominantly by women teachers and authority figures, that seems rigged against boys, against the higher activity level and lower level of impulse control that is normal for boys." In *Save the Males*, Kathleen Parker says, "[Boys'] interests aren't valued, and their behavior isn't tolerated." Parker describes the school day for boys as being "steeped in estrogen" during which boys are told of "how many 'bad choices' they've made."

It is true that elementary and middle school teachers are much more likely to be women than men. Remarkably, the boy-crisis authors do not account for why there are not more teachers who are men and, conversely, why so many, talented, educated young women view teaching as one of the few careers available to them. Elementary school teaching is a low-status job and is considered "women's work." The median salary for an elementary school teacher in the United States in 2012 was $40,000. So even though men who are elementary school teachers are paid more than women, it is not surprising that only 13% of them are men. Those men who do choose woman-dominated fields tend to be treated differently, which in this case, means better. Men in woman-dominated careers benefit from what has been called the "glass escalator" — the phenomenon whereby men, at least white men, in woman-dominated jobs such as nursing and elementary teaching, are given preferential treatment in terms of hiring and promotions. They are promoted into administrative and managerial positions at a faster rate than are women.

What does actual research find on teachers' treatment of girl and boy students? Is the classroom rigged against boys? Is boys' behavior not tolerated as the boy-crisis authors suggest? Are boys thorns among girls, who are roses? In 1988 Alison Kelly published a comprehensive meta-analysis on teacher-pupil interactions that examined the attention teachers give to girl and boy students. She compiled the data from 81 previously conducted studies. Here's a summary of what Kelly found:

It is now beyond dispute that girls receive less of the teacher's attention in class, and that this is true across a wide range of different conditions. It applies to all age groups (although more in some than in others), in several different countries, in various socio-economic and ethnic groupings, across all subjects in the curriculum, and with both male and female teachers (although more with males). Boys get more of all kinds of classroom interaction. This discrepancy is most marked for behavioral criticism, but this does not explain the overall imbalance. Boys also get more instructional contacts, more high-level questions, more academic criticism and slightly more praise than girls.

Kelly's study is comprehensive but her work is dated. Does more recent research reveal different patterns of teacher treatment of girls and boys? One study found that the attention to boys was more likely to be negative than positive. And some studies say that boys are given more attention because they take more initiative than do girls. However, most studies find that boys receive more negative and more positive attention from teachers and that boys' initiating interaction does not account for this differential treatment. In other words, boys may raise their hands or call out to the teacher more often than girls, but above and beyond this difference, teachers attend to them more than they attend to girls. What does the attention look like? One study found that boys receive more criticism of their behavior than girls, but they also receive more intellectual criticism and intellectual acceptance than do girls. The positive and negative intellectual-related interactions boys have with teachers reveal that teachers take boys seriously as intellectual beings and encourage them to think critically. This differential treatment also reveals that more intellectual advances are expected of boys than girls, and that boys are more valued than girls for their intellect.

Boys get more of all kinds of classroom attention. These interactions do not amount to a "toxic" environment for the white middle class boys who are the focus of boy-crisis writers. A useful endeavor would be to examine the degree to which schools might be toxic to ethnic minority students — both boys and girls. For example, in their meta-analysis on teachers' expectations of students, Harriet Tenenbaum and Martin Ruck found that teachers held more positive expectations for white and Asian American students than African American and Latino students. Teachers also made more positive comments to white students than to African American and Latino students. African American boys might be particularly targeted by teachers because teachers rate their behavior as more antisocial, and they have lower academic expectations for them than they do for African American girls. African American students, African American boys especially, are more likely to receive disciplinary office referrals than students of other ethnicities. There is a warehouse of studies finding that African American men are perceived as more dangerous and aggressive than white men who engage in the same behavior. For authors who are so concerned with the plight of boys, it is unfortunate that Parker, Sommers, Pollack, Gurian, Kindlon and Thompson, and Biddulph do not address the
challenges that ethnic minority boys and men have in school and in the mass media representations of them.

Center Stealing and Perceptions of Male Marginalization

How can books, articles, pundits, and politicians over the past 15 to 20 years have such a warped view of the regard and treatment of girls and women compared with boys and men? Trina Grillo and Stephanie Wildman describe this blindness to inequality as the center stage problem. When those who are used to being at the center of everything important in society are moved from the center, however briefly, group members experience a threat and therefore are motivated to re-assert their privilege. The center stage problem occurs because dominant group members are already accustomed to being center stage; they have been treated that way by society; it feels natural, comfortable, and the natural order of things. Members of dominant groups assume that their perceptions are the pertinent ones, that their problems are the ones that need to be addressed, and that in discourses they should be the speaker rather than the listener. Part of being a member of a privileged group is being the center and the subject of all inquiry in which nonprivileged groups are the objects or pushed to the sidelines. So strong is this expectation of holding center stage that even when a time and place is specifically designated for members of a nonprivileged group to be central, members of the dominant group will often attempt to take back the focus. They are stealing the center—often with a complete lack of self-consciousness.

As Grillo and Wildman argue, when people who are not regarded as entitled to the center move into it, even momentarily, they are viewed as usurpers. In other words, members of the privileged group experience a threat when attention even temporarily and briefly turns away from them and toward members of a marginalized group. Feelings of personal entitlement can lead members of dominant groups to be blind to seeing when they are unfairly overbenefiting, and their unearned and unjust privilege leads them to regard efforts to “level the playing field” as fundamentally unfair.

Entitlement and the Privilege to Underperform

We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity becomes this hard small cage and we put boys inside the cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability.

—CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, 2014

So if boys are getting plenty of teacher attention and the curriculum is geared toward them, why do boys tend to earn lower grades and go to college in fewer numbers than girls? There may be several reasons but two are presented here. First, school is considered a feminine environment, doing well in schools is inconsistent with masculinity. A second reason is the problem of male entitlement.

School Is for Sissies

Research on girls’ and boys’ interactions with teachers and peers finds that boys are more likely to be influenced by other boys—not teachers and not girls. If a boy sees peers positively to a behavior, boys are more likely to continue the behavior than if the peer criticizes the behavior. The reactions of teachers and girls to a boys’ behavior tend to be irrelevant. In her book Save the Males, Kathleen Parker states that boys prefer the company of men. “That is because a woman is perceived as just another mother, while a man is a Man.” Precisely. Just as our review of the literature indicates, women matter less than men in society, and, not surprisingly, boys internalize this message. Women, even women teachers who are in positions of authority, are perceived as just “moms,” so who cares what they think? Men are more interesting, are higher in status, and worthy of boys’ attention. But this pattern goes beyond simply finding women teachers boring. For boys as young as elementary school years, defying teachers’ authority—and in the elementary years most teachers are women—is a means by which to gain popularity with other boys.

Like boys, girls are also influenced by same-gender peers, but in contrast to boys, they are also influenced by teachers. Boys are more concerned than girls about looking cool to their main social group—other boys. School achievement is incompatible with this goal. The social dominance goals of having power over peers are negatively correlated with academic achievement for boys. So the extent to which a student thinks that being powerful over others and seeming tough is important, that student will perform worse academically. Research finds that boys’ culture is less study-oriented than girls’ culture and that this study culture influences achievement. In other words, one reason girls tend to outperform boys is because boys are concerned about conforming to gender stereotypes that say that school is for girls. Boys are worried about looking weak (i.e., feminine), so boys will avoid academic achievement to the extent that it is viewed as feminine. Stereotypically masculine traits (for example, competitiveness, assertiveness) are more valued in U.S. and Western European cultures. In fact, attributes arbitrarily labeled “male” are more valued than the exact same characteristics that are labeled “female.” So to the extent that school achievement is seen as feminine, even when curricula and teacher behavior are male-centered,
some boys and young men will dismiss or discount school activities and academic achievement. Therefore, it’s not the school experience that feminizes boys but rather the ideology of traditional masculinity that keeps boys from wanting to succeed. Unfortunately, some boys see academic success itself as a disconfirmation of their masculinity.

In their book, *Raising Cain*, Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson say, “Today many boys face a steady diet of shame and anxiety throughout their elementary school years. From it they learn only to feel bad about themselves and to hate the place that makes them feel that way.” Since boys are favored by curriculum and teachers, it is difficult to imagine too many boys feeling bad about themselves after a day at school.

The end-of-men/boy-crisis authors would have us believe that the world has become too female-centered, and that schools in particular are too female-focused thanks to feminism. We have already established this argument as baseless. Therefore, let’s consider an alternative view.

In addition to the issue of school success as indicative of girliness, one way to help us understand and explain the data that boys are performing less well in school is to examine the role of entitlement and privilege. Psychological or personal entitlement refers to one’s sense of deservingness. Entitlement reflects the belief that a person deserves a set of outcomes because of who they are or what they have done. Social psychologists tend to define entitlement as deservingness based less on what someone has accomplished (an *achieved* characteristic) and more on *who* the person is (an *ascribed* characteristic). Individuals with a strong sense of entitlement believe they deserve good things to come to them. Not surprising, entitled people are fairly self-centered. They have the tendency to take credit for positive events and to blame others for negative ones. Entitled people tend to shy away from information that contradicts their worldview and avoid situations that do not reinforce their positive self-image. Studies consistently find that men have a stronger sense of entitlement than do women. (Unfortunately, most of the research on gender and entitlement has examined white respondents, therefore we know little about the interaction of gender and ethnicity.) Men also tend to score higher than women on the related concept of narcissism.

How does entitlement manifest? One way is in overconfidence. Men give higher estimates of their ability than do women, and men’s self-estimates tend to be independent of their actual ability. On cognitive tests, for instance, men give themselves higher ratings than their actual performance merits, whereas women tend to have a more realistic appraisal of their own performance.

Entitlement is difficult to measure because individuals who are entitled tend not to recognize their own sense of it, just as individuals who experience and benefit from privilege (e.g., white people, men, heterosexuals) do not recognize their unearned privilege. Social psychologists typically measure entitlement through pay expectations; they assign individuals to a task and ask them how much they would expect to be paid. In study after study, we find that women’s wage entitlement is lower than men’s.

In a representative study, Lisa Barron conducted simulated job interviews with MBA students. Men’s initial salary requests were higher than women’s, even though women and men did not differ in GPA, age, previous salary, and negotiation training. Men were more likely to have a strong sense of what they are worth, and they also expected the company to pay them what they believed they are worth. Women were more likely to believe that they could prove their value in the negotiation. In contrast, women were less likely to have a sense of what they are worth, and they expected the company to determine their worth. Women were also more likely to think that they could prove their value only once they got on the job. Men also reported that they were entitled to a higher salary than their similarly situated peers, whereas women were more likely to believe that they were entitled to the same salary as their peers. In another study, researchers gave college students a task to complete, followed by instructions to pay themselves what they thought their work was worth. Although independent raters who judged the work perceived no differences in the quality of the work, self-ratings indicated that women and men evaluated and paid themselves differently. Men paid themselves 18% more than did women for the same amount and quality of work.

Do men think they deserve more because they actually do better work? They might think they do better work, but they do not perform better in these studies. And even if they know they did not perform well, they think they should be paid as much as if they had performed well. This is entitlement. In one classic experiment, Brenda Major and her colleagues had college students complete a task. When they were finished they could pay themselves what they considered fair for the work they completed, and leave any remaining money behind. Like most studies, women paid themselves significantly less than what men paid themselves. In a second experiment, Major and her colleagues paid students a fixed amount of money to perform a task in which the students could work for as long as they thought was fair. When women and men cannot choose how much they deserve because the salary is fixed, do the usual gender differences in entitlement disappear? No, entitlement just takes a different form. In experiments in which pay is fixed, women (1) worked longer than men did, (2) completed more of the work than men, (3) did so more accurately, and (4) even worked more efficiently than men. After the main part of the study, participants were asked to provide evaluations of their own performances. Despite the fact that women worked longer than men, completed more work, and worked more accurately and efficiently, women and men did not differ in their self-rated performance evaluations.
experiments suggest important differences between women’s and men’s sense of entitlement.

Major’s findings of gender differences in entitlement tend to be framed in terms of women having “depressed” entitlement, whereas men have a normal, healthy sense of entitlement. It is true that in these kinds of studies, women tend to pay themselves less than men for the same or better quality work, and believe the pay allocation to be fair.109 However, a more recent experiment finds that the issue does not seem to be that women’s entitlement is deflated, but rather that men’s entitlement is inflated. Brett Pelham and John Jetts110 asked American college students to solve easy, moderate, or difficult anagrams of scrambled words. Participants were asked to evaluate their own performance and then paid themselves for their work. You might guess that: those who performed poorly would pay themselves less than those who performed well. This was the case for women, but not for men. Specifically, women paid themselves less when they had performed poorly—when they had solved fewer anagrams. However, men paid themselves well even when they had performed poorly. Pelham and Jetts speculate that men seem to think that their personal feelings of worth entitle them to a certain level of payment, regardless of the quality of their performance.

The women in these studies based their level of self-pay on their evaluations of their work (performance, an achieved status) rather than their evaluations of their worth (who they are, an ascribed status).

Perhaps it is not surprising that men believe they are worth more than do women. Society rewards them accordingly. In experiments, participants tend to pay men more than women for the same job. For instance, Melissa Williams111 and her colleagues presented Asian American and white participants with a description of an employee and job and were asked how much the employee should be paid. Participants allocated higher salaries to men than to women. Even in experiments when jobs are simply labeled as “male” they are viewed as higher valued and therefore meriting a higher salary than jobs with the exact same characteristics labeled “female.”112 So people think that men should be paid more than women for doing the same work and that “men’s” jobs deserve more pay than “women’s” jobs.

When women and men have been asked about what they deserve, how they compare to others, and what information should be used in hiring and salary decisions, there are interesting differences there too. One study found that women’s investment in work is not determined by the financial rewards they receive: they invest as much as they can in work regardless of pay. Men, on the other hand, admit to doing more work when pay is higher and less work when pay is lower.113 Mary Hogue114 and her colleagues asked individuals about the characteristics important in determining pay. The following characteristics are typically cited: work output (quality and quantity of work), specific status characteristics (worker education, job experience), job attributes (responsibility, working conditions, impact of job, complexity), and ascribed status characteristics (age, race, gender). When setting a salary, men placed greater importance on ascribed status characteristics than women. Women placed greater importance on work output, specific status characteristics, and job attributes. In terms of determinants of salary, men feel comfortable relying on what they are, whereas women rely on what they have done.

Both women and men seem to go along with men’s overconfidence and inflated entitlement, consequently men are led to see their level of deservings as fair and equal even when, objectively, it is not. For example, one study115 asked people to play a bargaining game in which one person offers an amount of money to another and the responder decides whether or not the offered amount is acceptable. Of course each side in the negotiation is motivated to obtain the most amount of money—the proposer is motivated to give up as little as possible and the responder is motivated to obtain as much as possible. Women made higher offers overall than did men. Men were offered more than women and less was demanded from men than women. So more was offered to men even when they did not demand more. It is not surprising that some men feel entitled to things they have not earned. How could they not? People reward them accordingly.

What are the repercussions of these gendered patterns of entitlement and salaries? Obviously, if women ask for less and are offered less, they will earn less than men who ask for more and are offered more. Pay raises are often based on a percentage of the worker’s salary. If men start out earning more than women, they will get higher and higher raises over their careers. Also, the mere recognition of a pay difference associated with group membership is enough to make people believe that the higher-paid group is more competent and worthy than a lower-paid group.116 In other words, if people notice that men make more money than women, they infer that men deserve more and are worth more; therefore, the pay inequity is perceived as justified when it is not.

Academic Entitlement

Much of this chapter has examined the “boy crisis” in education. How do feelings of entitlement influence the school experience? Some research has examined the concept of academic entitlement. In their research on academic entitlement, Karolyn Chowning117 and her colleagues find that on some dimensions of academic entitlement women and men score similarly. For instance, women and men tend to agree with statements such as “Professors must be entertaining to
be good" and "My professors should curve my grade if I am close to the next grade." However, on a measure of externalized responsibility, men are more likely to agree with statements such as "It is unnecessary for me to participate in class when the professor is paid for teaching, not for asking questions" and "For group assignments, it is acceptable to take a back seat and let others do most of the work if I am busy." Men more than women are likely to agree with statements such as "Instructors should bend the rules for me" and "If I felt I deserved a higher grade, I would tell the instructor."119 The authors conclude that students who attribute their performance to their courses or instructors may fail to self-correct or develop adaptive strategies for success in college.

As we mentioned earlier, men are more likely to be narcissists than are women. One particular type of narcissism, exploitativeness/entitlement, is more common among men than women. Individuals with high levels of exploitative-ness/entitlement narcissism would agree with statements such as "I find it easy to manipulate people" and "I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve." Interestingly, this particular aspect of narcissism is associated with academic disengagement, such as not attending class.120 The implication here is that inflated self-importance may lead to shirking academic obligations and lower academic performance.

Unfortunately, parents contribute to some boys' overconfidence. Both parents of boys, as well as boys themselves, overestimate their intelligence relative to their actual intelligence. Parents of daughters, and girls themselves, tend to underestimate their intelligence.121 Boys tend to view themselves as more competent than how teachers view them, whereas girls tend to view themselves as less competent than how teachers view them.122 These differences, most evident in the lack of agreement between boys and their teachers on competence and the work cited previously indicating that boys are more likely to listen to other boys than they are to teachers, suggest that boys may be less attentive to expectations from others than girls, and therefore they also may be affected less by evaluations from others.123 Boys' inflated sense of entitlement and their privileged status as males allows them to be insensitive to others' evaluations. Boys' and men's sense of entitlement, coupled with the perception that school performance and academic commitment is incompatible with masculinity, may account for boys and men's disengagement with school.

The Gender Gap in College Attendance

A key piece of the argument that there is a war against boys and men is that women now outnumber men in college and university attendance and graduation rates. Women make up 57% of the students at U.S. universities.124 So they do make up the majority of college students, but this number hardly represents a female takeover and male demise. There are important caveats to even these fairly modest numbers. First, men continue to outnumber women in the attendance at most elite colleges and universities. Harvard has a 50/50 split of their undergraduate enrollment, but Princeton and Yale's men represent 51% of the student body; the University of Chicago has 56% men; Stanford has 52% men, Caltech has 65% men, and MIT has 63% men.125 Second, men are still more likely to graduate with degrees that lead to higher-paying jobs. For example, in 2014 the average starting salary of a person with a degree in Education was $40,590. Humanities and Social Sciences majors earned $38,045, but Math/Sciences and Engineering majors earned $42,596 and $62,564, respectively.126 Of course, women could choose to major in male-dominated fields such as math, sciences, and engineering, but they will still make lower salaries than men with the same majors.127 Third, men make more money than women in every education category from high school dropouts to those with high school diplomas to college graduates.128 In terms of earning power, then, men as a whole do not need as much education as do women for higher pay—simply because they are men. Surely, girls and boys alike should be encouraged to seek higher education, but end-of-men/boy-crisis authors fail to consider the causes other than a supposedly antithetical climate that may account for the increase in young women attending college relative to men.

Another frequently cited gender difference used as evidence that schools are systematically harmful for boys is that girls generally excel at reading and writing relative to boys. Concerns about boys' reading and writing difficulties are valid; however, as noted earlier, the stereotypically male careers of math, science, and technology are much more prestigious and lucrative than stereotypically female careers in reading and writing. Support for boys' success in the more lucrative math and technology fields comes from parents, teachers, and boys themselves. Teachers and parents reinforce gender-segregated career categories. For instance, teachers overrate male students' mathematics capability and believe boys to be more interested, more confident, and to have higher achievement in science and math than girls.129 Teachers also call on boys more often in science classes (although boys also more often volunteer questions and comments).130 Parents perceive sons as more competent in science, and they expect better performance from them compared to daughters.131 Again, pointing to boys' deficits in reading and writing as indicative of schools shortchanging boys does not take into account boys' achievements and the different value and compensation for those achievements. Parents encourage their children to take gender-stereotyped courses: they select fewer foreign language courses for their sons and fewer science courses for their daughters.132 Across all academic domains parents' underestimate daughters' compared to sons' abilities, and this underestimation is reflected in their talk
Conclusion

The end-of-men/boy-crisis rhetoric says that feminism brought attention to girls’ and women’s needs in education but, in doing so, feminists subordinated boys’ needs to the point that girls and women got ahead of boys and men. Contrary to the inflamed rhetoric about the end-of-men, boys and men continue to be at the center of popular culture and education. Male characters continue to dominate television shows, television cartoons, children’s television shows, television commercials, commercial voiceovers, films, music videos, magazine advertisements, newspaper comics, and even cereal boxes and clipart. Boys and men are portrayed as doing things—they take risks, they adventure, they are leaders, they work, and they take care of business. They matter. Boys and men continue to be portrayed as the regular, normal, natural human. Girls and women largely operate in a service capacity to boys and men. What girls and women do matters less.

Nevertheless, books continue to be written and sold that argue that the education system is “rigged against boys.” A systematic review of school materials and teacher behavior demonstrates just the opposite. Just as mass media in general put men at the center, so do teaching materials. Teachers continue to focus most of their attention—both positive and negative—on boys. Teachers and parents expect more intellectually from boys than from girls. Even when teachers attempt to be “gender-blind” in their interactions with students, as well as their choices in curricula and lesson plans, they tend to use male-centered curricula without realizing what they are doing. However, teachers who have been trained in gender equity tend to distribute their attention more equitably between girls and boys than those who have not. The problem of course is that if teachers believe that it is boys, not girls who are short-changed, they are not prepared to notice their own behavior when it is directed to keep boys at the center.

The end-of-men/boy-crisis authors attack the relatively brief moment of academic, educational, and popular focus on the inhospitable nature of classrooms and educational institutions for girls and women and demand a focus not just broadened to include boys but redirected once again to exclude girls. William Pollack, author of *Real Boys*, even declares, “Boys’ poor performance is a global issue.” He ignores the fact that in many countries girls are denied access to formal education simply because they are girls and, in some cultures, when a family has resources for only one child to attend school, it is the boy who is allowed to attend. According to UNESCO, women account for two-thirds of the global illiterate population and that number has remained virtually the same over the past twenty years.

Feelings of personal entitlement can lead members of dominant groups to be blind to seeing when they are unfairly over-benefiting, and their unearned and unjust privilege leads them to regard efforts to “level the playing field” as fundamentally unfair to them. Grillo and Wildman’s center stage problem helps us understand how those who are accustomed to being at the center of everything important in society are threatened when a spotlight is shone on a marginalized group even for a brief moment. When people who are not regarded as entitled to the center move into it, they are viewed as usurpers. The reaction is a backlash and a re-assertion of privilege.

Girls and women are usurpers. Jean Twenge notes that in recent decades girls and women earn better grades and obtain college degrees because of an increased emphasis on instrumentality (e.g., assertiveness, competitiveness—characteristics traditionally associated with men) for women. Twenge argues that society has done a good job of encouraging girls to be instrumental, and now girls are prepared to compete with boys. Women regard achievement-related status enhancements (e.g., education, experience) as more important to employee pay decisions than men do, whereas men suggest that ascribed status (who a person is) should be utilized in pay decisions. Trends in society suggest that women are taking the steps necessary to enhance their achievement-related status through education and training. For some men, their sense of entitlement does not always match their actual achievement. Rather than blaming feminism for the supposed end of men, we should focus on patriarchy and male dominance as producing gender rules that dictate that school, and anything else coded as feminine, is viewed as weakness; that women teachers have nothing useful to say to boys and men; and that simply being a man should be good enough for success without hard work, education, and training.

Notes


peers: The implications for academic adjustment during early adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 100, 417–428. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.100.2.417


125. These numbers come from the universities’ website fact sheets, 2013-2014.


