

# Feminism and Individualism



**Rather than teaching immigrants to embrace individualism, we should learn from their cultures that cherish families.**

**By PATRICIA MARKS GREENFIELD**

**L**ike many other 1970s feminists, I envisioned a future in which women's roles would include a professional life as men's roles expanded to include responsibilities for home and children. The bedrock of the process would be equality between the sexes; its result would be the enrichment of both women's and men's lives.

Two decades later, it hasn't worked out that way. Women got their careers, but with a few exceptions, men never got an expanded role at home. What went wrong? Here is my theory: Society got the half of the feminist program that was compatible with a social philosophy that was stronger, deeper and more acceptable in this country than feminism—individualism.

Individualism is the legacy of an economic system, a philosophical heritage and a political history that values individual freedom and personal happiness above all else. The individualistic half of the feminist program had nothing to do with men as contributors to the family. That is the social or communitarian half of feminism.

The inexorable growth of individualism, with its emphasis on choice, independence and personal development, can be seen throughout our society. Instead of a new balance between home and career for both men and women, everyone is working harder (or not at all). Respect for roles and activities that contribute to family relations and family development has sunk to the point where women often feel ashamed of devoting themselves to home and family. At the same time, men who do their fair share at home are viewed as lacking ambition. The communitarian half of the women's movement is dead.

The development of an individual's career depends

on subordinating family responsibilities. After the Northridge earthquake, the press was full of praise for those who quickly left their damaged homes and shaken families to take up their workplace responsibilities. I saw no laudatory stories about those who stayed home to take care of their families.

The plagues of extreme individualism are isolation, alienation and a failure to nurture the next generation. These plagues have become epidemic in our society. The witnesses are random crime, gangs, no-parent children, homelessness.

Where do we go from here? We have many new immigrants in our country. Most come from societies that give family responsibilities, family unity and social interdependence more importance than is the norm here. They already have the communitarian values of the missing half of the feminist program. Instead of trying to eradicate their family loyalties as we assimilate them to our individualistic society, we must learn from them in a process of cultural accommodation and exchange. For example, rather than criticizing Latino immigrants for living together in small quarters, we need to recognize that we can learn something from the familial closeness they are expressing and from the homelessness they are preventing. Rather than criticizing Asian parents for pressuring their children to become dentists and engineers, we need to recognize the social aspects of viewing education as a means to help family and community. Multiculturalism, in the sense of learning from one another's values, is a crucial process.

Within the women's movement, reproduction and child rearing have come to be seen as an artificial social construction, not an evolutionary necessity. Motherhood is viewed as a role from which to be liberated, not one to celebrate and cherish. Leaders of the women's movement have questioned why the movement does not appeal to women of color. The answer is that women of color know that half of the feminist program is missing. By learning from the value systems of our immigrant groups, we can renew both family values and the women's movement. The next generation will benefit.

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