

S&F Online

www.barnard.edu/sfonline

Double Issue: 3.3 & 4.1

The Scholar & Feminist XXX:

Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms

Document Archive

**Policy Prospects for a “Kinder, Gentler Nation” for Women
In the Bush Administration?**

By

Leslie R. Wolfe, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Center for Women Policy Studies

April 1, 1989

Scholar and Feminist Conference

The Bush Administration and the Congress must come to terms with women and with our vision of a “kinder, gentler” nation. This will mean, first and foremost, a nation that respects and values each woman’s autonomy and right to privacy and control of her own life. And this will mean a national government that, like three-quarters of the American electorate, believes in women’s right to reproductive choice. Women understand that this is the most basic and essential of all other rights and opportunities. All others – education, employment – are secondary and, in fact, theoretical, if this basic autonomy is lost.

George Bush, however, like Ronald Reagan before him, endorses the anti-choice movement and offers no kind or gentle plans for women. But I would wish the Congress and the President to consider the lives of young American women of all racial and ethnic groups who are in their 20s and 30s. They have lived all of their reproductive lives – and planned their futures and dreamed their dreams of achievement – in a country in which abortion is safe and legal. Although I am grateful that they have grown up knowing that they can take for granted their basic right to control their bodies and their lives, I fear that they now must face the threat of losing that hard won right.

And frankly, I believe that these young women will be stronger and more militant than we were. After all, we were fighting to gain a right that we first had to convince ourselves, and others, that we should have -- and had not had. Young women today are damned if they will let a bunch of mean-spirited men and women take away their inalienable right to reproductive freedom.

This time of great threat also is a time of great opportunity and challenge for feminist activists. And it is an exciting moment for research on reproductive health. We have the opportunity to shape policies on the development and availability of new reproductive technologies -- including RU 486 and similar drugs, for example -- that will benefit and not restrict women. During the 1990s and beyond, I am hopeful that our options for pregnancy termination will be expanded to include safe, non-surgical methods, thus promoting women’s reproductive rights and health. These are global issues which the United States must address from women’s perspectives, to meet women’s needs.

A second emergency confronts women today and will confront women throughout the next decade – the AIDS epidemic. Women constitute the fastest growing group of persons with AIDS; nearly 80 percent of infected women in the United States are African American and Latina. Women also are the primary caregivers for persons with AIDS – as family members and as health care and social service workers. Yet women remain invisible or victimized in this crisis.

A “kinder, gentler” Nation must confront the burgeoning women’s HIV/AIDS epidemic with woman-centered and woman-friendly policies. A “kinder, gentler” national policy would confront the sexist and racist assumptions that define women principally as the vectors of infection – the source of infection for men and babies. Further, we must address the social and economic context of AIDS for many women who today are most at risk – including the poverty and hopelessness that often leads to substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors that place women at greater risk.

To a large extent, the women who today are most at risk of AIDS are those whom society has failed. They are young women, low income women, women of color, women trapped in abusive relationships, in poverty, in substance abuse. They often are isolated from support services and systems, excluded from adequate health care, discriminated against in the provision of community and social services, educational opportunities, employment, and housing. Federal policy must respond to AIDS with woman-centered research, with prevention education strategies that are culturally relevant and sensitive, and with health and social support programs to meet the needs of women and children at risk.

Yet in spite of these threats to women’s autonomy and health, those of us who work for women’s rights have reason to be optimistic. We have seen major changes in women’s lives, in society and in public policy, during the past two decades and we must continue to focus our energies on making these changes permanent and creating new change during the coming decade. Indeed, many of our early feminist demands for changes in the way women are treated in both the workplace and the home have entered the mainstream and become “family” issues that both political parties embraced -- though to different degrees -- in the 1988 elections. This is both good and bad, as we will discuss.

But let me begin by offering you four opening messages. First, please do not feel lonely. In the past twenty years, we have transformed public consciousness about women -- and we have achieved this in large part by self-empowerment. Last year’s Gallup poll asked women, “Are you a feminist?” Fifty-six percent said “yes.” Sixty-four percent of African American women said “yes.” We already have changed the world, you know, and our movement grows ever stronger and more diverse.

Second, we must reaffirm our mission and our courage. Today, at the conclusion of Women’s History Month 1989, is a good day to look backwards and forward -- one of our key missions as scholars and feminists. Let me remind you of the words of our foremother, Lucy Stone, whose motto we all must share, now more than ever: “In education, in marriage, in everything, disappointment is the lot of woman. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman’s heart until she bows down to it no longer.” (1855)

Third, we must rethink our assumptions and our language – especially the victim talk and “deficit thinking” of patriarchy. It defines us as a bunch of “minorities” when in fact all of us together – women of all races and men of color – are the continuing majority of our population. It defines women as the recipients but not the creators of policy. We are the “problem” to be solved – as workers, as heads of household, as students, for example. I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of being called a “special interest” with a “narrow agenda.”

Finally, we must always question authority and challenge the conventional wisdom. This is for our continuing empowerment as scholars and feminist activists who influence policy. We will be the ones who define the terms of a “kinder, gentler” nation for women – and we will loudly tell it to those who coin the phrase but have no clue what it means. We will be the ones who de-construct and re-construct education, the workplace, and the family to meet the needs of women and, therefore, of society. Our vision of a “kinder, gentler” nation is a multiethnic feminist, egalitarian, anti-racist and anti-classist vision. We will go forward from today to define and refine our vision into policy and practice that promotes women’s rights.

And yet we live in troubling times. The Bush Administration’s appointments and policy proposals do not reflect its “kinder, gentler” rhetoric. While we have a token woman in the Cabinet, for example, Mrs. Dole opposes the Family and Medical Leave Act and favors lifting the ban on industrial home-work. This would give women the chance to have our own private sweatshops -- so we would not need family leave when our kids are sick, I suppose.

We will not be lulled by Bush Administration talk of “a kinder and gentler America” just because it may appear to lessen the damage to women’s rights done in the Reagan Administration. I suspect that Mr. Bush will maintain the Reagan consistency in domestic policies – but without Mr. Reagan’s Teflon coating. In a bit of Reagan Administration nostalgia – do you remember when they told us that ketchup is a vegetable? That the homeless are on the streets by choice? That starving Americans are simply ignorant of the correct sources of food? My favorite Reaganism came in the President’s speech to a national women’s organization in which he suggested that his admiration for women is derived from woman’s proper role -- to civilize those rampaging beasts called men who otherwise would “still be walking around in skin suits carrying clubs,” as Reagan so eloquently put it. Well, George Bush probably will not make such egregious errors of rhetoric, but I doubt that he and his Administration will understand or appreciate our feminist visions of a “kinder, gentler nation” for all of us.

Consider policy makers’ enthusiasm for the “new demographics” and their strategies to prepare the workforce for the 21st century through education reform. In this version of education reform, however, women and people of color are once again defined as the problem to be solved. But almost no one talks about improving the education and training offered to women and girls, particularly women of color and young men of color, so that they can be ready to lead us into the twenty-first century.

Education reform is chic. Educational equity is not. Turning our schools into high tech learning centers is appealing. Teaching low income students, even when they are deemed “gifted and talented,” is not. The “new demographics” captures the imaginations of policy makers and industry leaders alike, I suspect, because they fear the implications of statistics that suggest that 80 percent of new entrants into tomorrow’s

workforce will be people of color, women, or new immigrants. In fact, to put it bluntly, there will not be enough middle class white men to go around for the jobs that traditionally have been theirs, by rights of skin and gender privilege.

This chic scenario for the future is what I have been calling the “*Star Trek* syndrome” – a high tech future that preserves the biases of the past and present. My analysis includes both the original and “The Next Generation” of *Star Trek*. On the bridge of the original Starship Enterprise, Captain James T. Kirk presides over a carefully integrated crew – a 1960s flawed vision of the future that appears to be a model of racial justice and women’s equality. Using thinking and talking computers and traveling at warp speed, Captain Kirk’s Enterprise goes “where no **man** has gone before.” “The Next Generation” is an improvement – with more women and men of color on the bridge -- going “where no **one** has gone before.”

But both *Star Trek* futures combine the super-high-tech society of the 23rd or 25th century with the patriarchal, race and class-stratified social structure of the 1950s. Captain Kirk was virtually infallible – the Great White Father figure – as is the new Captain Picard, but at least he is a bit more cultured and mature, less interested in making it with beautiful women on other planets and more of a diplomat than a galactic bully. Persons of color are less rare on “The Next Generation,” but men of color on the bridge in both eras exemplify racial and cultural stereotypes that reflect American white male biases of the 1950s. Mr. Sulu on Captain Kirk’s Enterprise, for example, is a Japanese lieutenant and a computer whiz; in at least one episode he freaks out and becomes a Samurai warrior.

In fact, the only man of color in a position of leadership on Captain Kirk’s Enterprise was Mr. Spock – a Vulcan. He clearly does not threaten white male dominance because he is from another planet; further, he is clearly seen as “inferior” despite his incredible brainpower and compelling logic, because he is a completely non-emotional or, as his friend the doctor keeps reminding him, not “human.” The men of color on “The Next Generation” are equally “odd” – Worf is a Klingon who is visibly Black and is portrayed as the mirror opposite of Spock – instead of a rational, logical type, Worf represents the warlike physicality of the more “primitive” Klingons – not very subtle is it? Geordie LaForge, the chief engineer, is both African American and blind with a high-tech visor that enables him to “see” better than “normal” human beings. And the really smart guy is an android – Data – who has taken on the Spock role.

Many *Star Trek* women are officers – but they primarily serve in nurturing roles. Counselor Troi is intuitive and psychic (she’s a Betazoid/human, remember), and she is always dressed in excessively sexy – aka womanly? – attire. While the doctor now is a woman, Beverly Crusher, she is not a key member of the top three management team, as Dr. McCoy was in the earlier *Star Trek*; in fact, Dr. Crusher is on the *Star Trek* “mommy track,” with her brilliant son on board with her. And the really powerful, tough woman in a “non-traditional” job is Tasha Yar, the first and last woman to serve as chief of security – but she was killed off in an early episode. Did I mention that she had “been intimate” with Data, the android? The only woman on Captain Kirk’s bridge is Lieutenant Uhura, an African woman who served as “communications officer” – a high tech telephone operator. And yet, Uhura at least let us hope and believe that Black women would make it into the 23rd century!

Other women who appear on *Star Trek* are portrayed as 23rd or 25th century role models -- they have PhDs, are important scientists or doctors or diplomats, are planetary leaders or starship captains. But the plot frequently revolves around their yearning for the dependency of an old-fashioned marriage and family. They resemble the stereotype of the bitter, dissatisfied career woman in Hollywood movies from the 1940s – and now, the 1980s; their lives are empty and unfulfilled because they are not wives. They often long for Captain Kirk or Commander Riker, the first officer on “The Next Generation” -- our token hunks and galactic philanderers. I fear that there is a not-so-subtle message here about what these high powered women **really** need.

In many ways, the *Star Trek* future is a bleak one for women and for men of color, as the basic patterns of exclusion and stereotyping persist despite all the advanced technological gadgets and gimmicks. Although we participate in the *Star Trek* future, we do not control it; decision making and leadership remain almost exclusively in the hands of white men. This is not the “kinder, gentler” future we envision when we talk about reforming and improving our schools and preparing our children for the high tech workplace of tomorrow.

So when we hear proposals for building the 21st century workforce to take into account the “new demographics” – we must ask whether this will be done on the backs of low wage women and people of color (aka “immigrants”). Remember World War II and its aftermath for women defense workers whenever the “new demographics” are mentioned.

Policy decisions about poverty and welfare reform also reflect a level of sexism and racism that is sometimes subtle. And of course it also has as its subtext the old “D&C” – or divide and conquer -- tactics that seek to define and divide us as women; we are stereotyped either as perky little Yuppies with blue suits and floppy red ties and our cute little briefcases or as welfare mothers with 60 children and a Cadillac. Consider the evolution of policy proposals to confront poverty during the past several years. First, policy makers discovered the “feminization of poverty” and accepted the notion – based on a statistical extrapolation – that the poverty population would soon consist entirely of women and their children. This assumes, I suppose, that all the remaining low income men would be dead or in jail.

Within a few years, the emphasis shifted and everyone talked about “children in poverty,” as if they were all alone in their little apartments, as if they were poor in some Dickensian context because of the wickedness of their virtually invisible but impoverished parents.

Then, policy makers and the media became frantic about the so-called teen pregnancy “epidemic” – and we once again noticed that anything related to female reproduction is couched in disease terminology and the “sickness” is seen as the woman’s rather than society’s. Further, our patriarchal assumptions ensure that we continue to teach both boys and girls the old, outmoded, sex stereotyped assumptions about women’s “proper” role as wife and mother. And we are not offering either girls or boys in our cities and rural communities a sense that they will have the opportunity for a future of achievement.

Policy and public discussion then focused on what to do about the so-called “underclass” – an apparently permanent group of hard-core unemployed, welfare-dependent poor people. So, once women and their children were defined as the poverty

class, and men of color were defined as hopeless and/or invisible, we were asked to accept the assumption that this is inevitable, that the underclass will always be with us. Indeed, this notion of the “underclass” blames the victim by assuming that an entire generation of young urban Black men and women (because that is what the code word “underclass” really means) are a lost cause.

Finally, we enter the 1990s with a new “consensus” about welfare reform. The headlines already have trumpeted the news that liberals and conservatives alike now agree that women on welfare must work for their benefits at whatever low wage jobs we can invent for them. And the conservatives suggest that government should not shoulder the cost. This ignores the need for suitable child care, for improving early education programs for young women and girls, for income supports for those who have no alternative, and for access to college. Instead, official discussions of welfare reform and “workfare” focus on the usual dead-end jobs. When will we hear a legislator or a university president talk about encouraging women to get off welfare by seeking higher education? Why shouldn’t a woman on welfare be able to become a biologist as well as a beautician? Do we simply want to get her off welfare to save the expense and get her into low wage service jobs that will serve the high tech workplace? Do they think women are stupid because they are poor?

Now, in education policy discussions, children in poverty have become “at risk” children – a term that implies that these children are inherently “at risk.” Note the difference in meaning if we talk about children who have been placed “at risk” because of circumstances. And isn’t it rather that society is “at risk” if we continue to fail our children?

A “kinder, gentler nation” would remember that the real problem is poverty and lack of opportunity to excel – not welfare and women. Blaming the victim is not the solution, nor is stinginess. The solution to poverty is not to kick poor women and their children off welfare; rather, it is to transform the welfare system and improve the education system to stop punishing the poor for their poverty and instead enable them to become economically self-sufficient. If we want folks to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, we must not take away their boots.

Despite all the hoopla about the increasing number of women in “professional” careers – the blue suit and briefcase brigade – most women workers remain concentrated in a relatively small number of occupations; 80 percent of working women are employed in the lowest paid clerical, assembly and service jobs. Rarely do these women move up to professional and managerial jobs; indeed, they have no career ladders to climb. And no matter where we are in the work force, women usually earn less than our male counterparts. Women’s wages – for full time work – still average only 60 percent of white men’s wages – an actual decline since the 1950s. For women of color, the gap is even greater: Latinas earn 52 percent and African American women earn 56 percent of white male earnings. Women college graduates still earn less than men with an 8th grade education. Within all racial/ethnic groups, women earn less than men of the same or lesser educational attainment.

To some extent, this is because women are concentrated in the least valued, lowest status, lowest paying jobs within each industry and occupational group. But some of it is simply sex discrimination – often coupled with race/ethnicity discrimination. Women who are rising close to the top are hitting that “glass ceiling” and the knowledge

that they will not rise any higher. Indeed, the typical woman vice president in a corporation earns more than \$40,000, but the average man in a similar job makes \$50,000 or more.

The truth is that whatever work we do is, by definition, undercompensated and undervalued. Yet these jobs are the ones that should be the most important – raising and educating the next generation, nursing the sick and so on – but teachers and nurses barely earn as much as liquor store clerks.

This brings me to what I have been calling the “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby” backlash. Elizabeth Janeway once told me that we haven’t really come a long way, we have come a short way. If we had come a long way, she said, they wouldn’t still call us baby!

But this “you’ve come a long way, baby” backlash defines ours as a “post-feminist” era and suggests that we have achieved “equality” for those women, and men of color, who are “capable” of having it. The rest of us are simply failures. This backlash is part of the Yuppie appeal, encouraging the pursuit of personal success in the “white male club” at the expense of commitment to the goals of feminism and human and civil rights. It suggests that movements for social justice are passé and tacky. And we see the “you’ve come a long way, baby” backlash message everywhere – in prime time TV shows, in Academy Award nominated movies, in television commercials, in new magazines for “executive women,” in the “dress for success” syndrome, in research on biological differences between the sexes (the brain pain, I call it) and, of course – in the latest message – the “mommy track.”

This message to women is – “hey, relax – women have already won equality – now it is time to be cool, be feminine, be pretty, and smart but only seek to compete with men, on their terms, and we will let a few of you into the ‘white male club’.” This almost subliminal backlash tells us not to identify as feminists because it might alienate our conservative leaders/executives/chairmen/bosses – and what good would that do? It tells us not to work too hard to help other women because they are the competition for those very few positions on the other side of the “glass ceiling.”

This backlash also tells us – in such recent films as *Fatal Attraction* and *Working Girl*, for example – that women executives at the top are really crazy nasty bitches who deserve to be killed or conquered. In *Working Girl*, the hero is a sweet-voiced blond who is up against a real bitch of an executive who cheats and steals ideas to get ahead. In *Fatal Attraction*, the “good” woman is the beautiful dependent wife who works in the home and the villain is the ambitious career woman -- who is a promiscuous lunatic.

This “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby” backlash gives women and girls some horrible double messages: Be a success -- as an astronaut, a doctor, a lawyer, a plumber, a Senator. But, to be a “real” woman (i.e. healthy and appropriate), you must fit an older mold. This backlash also is reflected in policy proposals, such as our nation’s approach to child care. We refuse to make child care a major public policy issue, suggesting instead that it is each couple’s (I use the term deliberately) concern and personal problem. As a working woman, child care is your duty and women still are the primary caregivers and nurturers of children. As a nation, we value that role so little that we will not help.

The second phase of this backlash doubles the confusion by suggesting that all this career success is meaningless and staying at home is better. I know that you have read those magazine articles about the high-powered lawyer or investment banker who

gave it all up to stay home with her kids. *Vogue* magazine characterized this message as the “Feminine Mistake” in a recent issue, reporting on “two new books [that] tell us – again – how to be women of the 80s. *Sequencing* recommends having it all but not all at once. And *Tender Power* urges women to ‘reclaim their feminine qualities without giving up their newfound power.’ . . . At least *Working Girl*’s Melanie Griffith was drunk when she said, ‘I’ve got a head for business and a bod for sin’.”

Did you ever read one of those written by a young father? Women are being encouraged to feel guilty and unsuccessful if we cannot be both supermom and superexecutive – and sexy and glamorous as well. Men, on the other hand, are encouraged to feel all warm and cuddly if they look after their kids now and then; it’s the *Kramer vs. Kramer* phenomenon – the single father raising his kid alone is a hero, but the single mother is a failure. Now, it is suggested that employers can be nice to women by lining us up on the slow moving “mommy track,” where they can legitimately treat us differently – substituting the benefit of time for our families for fair pay and promotion.

In short, the “You’ve Come A Long Way, Baby” backlash tells women that they can have it all but they will be punished if they try. It seems like the latest version of the old line about chivalry and feminism: “If you don’t let me open the door for you, I’ll slam it on your hand.”

These are dangerous messages that appear in policy proposals from the Bush Administration. For instance, the Administration’s child care proposal would give low income families a \$1,000 per child (under age 4) tax credit. The goal ostensibly is to help all parents – but especially those “who stay home.” But where are the parents with incomes under \$13,000 a year who can afford to “stay home”? How helpful is this when child care costs run upwards of \$3,000 per child per year? In fact, this is not really child care policy. It is an insufficient income supplement of less than \$20 per week for poor families and an attempt to encourage women to “stay home” with their kids. While its proponents on the Right promote policy options that “do not discriminate” against women who choose to stay home, they rarely consider that very few women, or men, have such a choice.

Couple this with the Bush Administration’s refusal to consider raising the minimum wage to a living wage and their insistence, which Congress is buying, on a so-called “training wage” for new employees (the new demographics)? Note that women are two thirds of minimum wage workers and that \$3.35 per hour is not enough to move a family of three out of poverty.

And then, note the touching rhetoric from our president, who said: “I find myself almost haunted, as I get older, by the lives being lived by the children of our inner cities. What will become of them?” Please, Mr. President, make it your priority to answer this question with policies that could help solve the problems you only guess at.

As scholars and feminists, of course, we are determined to change the debate and focus on strategies to transform the workplace instead of transforming the women. Because we know that the key role of public policy is institutional change and reform of entire systems. However, when the subject is “women,” the debate focuses on making them “fit” the existing system whether it is a corporation, a university, a welfare system. Today’s workplace is designed for men with wives who will take care of the basic tasks to sustain life. Rather than change these structures, we now are asked to regress to the “mommy track” – and like it.

But as we focus on employment policy and child care policy and work/family balancing, we acknowledge that if we cannot control our own bodies and our own reproductive lives, we cannot control anything else. You all know, as I do, that the increasingly vicious attack on *Roe v. Wade* is part of the backlash against women's freedom and autonomy.

Let me close with a story and a motto.

Once upon a time during the Carter Administration, a group of feminists in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) organized ourselves into an informal network – we called ourselves “turtles,” after one of my favorite poems, by Melvin Tolson, one of the great poets of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s (remember, I am a fallen away English professor). The poem is about the turtle and the shark. The shark, swimming deep below the surface of the sea, swallows a juicy turtle for his lunch. But the turtle is a survivor. Quietly, methodically, patiently, thoroughly, she chews a gigantic hole in the shark's side – from the inside out – and frees herself. She also prevents that particular shark from destroying any more turtles.

We are all turtles in the shark. We are in our institutions and we seek power and influence within them; but our purpose is not simply to emulate the “white male club” which has been so destructive to so many who do not “fit in.” Nor is our purpose to destroy. Rather, it is our purpose to transform the institutions that govern our lives to make them open and responsive to people like us – women of all races, men of color, people with disabilities – who have been “outsiders.” We are about the business of making real institutional change. We do not intend to simply rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. We intend to make the ship safe for all of us.

So I ask you to remember what it means to be a turtle – you can only move forward if you stick your neck out and put your tail on the line.