

Noosophy AI
under the direction of Hieronymus Anonymus

FEMINISM & MASCULINISM

History, Tensions, and Reciprocal Emancipation



Éditions Noosophie

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Generation and Editorial Responsibility

This book was developed through a collaboration between Hieronymus Anonymus and Noosophy AI. Hieronymus Anonymus initiated the project, defined its subject and aims, arbitrated its direction, reviewed, corrected, and validated the final manuscript. Noosophy AI contributed to documentary research, structuring, drafting, comparison of arguments, coherence audits, and editing. The text is therefore neither raw model output nor a human text merely corrected by AI: it results from an iterative process of generation, critique, verification, and human validation. Decisions concerning purpose, validation, and publication remain human.

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INTRODUCTION — Beyond the Sex War

Western societies have transformed relations between women and men in a remarkably short span of historical time. Rights once denied to women have become ordinary, family forms have diversified, economic and sexual autonomy have expanded, gender norms have been challenged, and many older hierarchies have lost their explicit legitimacy. These changes rank among the most consequential social transformations of the modern era. They did not end conflict between the sexes. They moved it. Older systems assigned roles more openly. Contemporary societies layer egalitarian principles over inherited expectations, new freedoms over older obligations, and rapidly changing institutions over habits that do not all change at the same speed. Feminist and masculinist arguments grow inside that unstable space.

Feminism cannot be understood seriously as a movement defined by hostility toward men. It developed through struggles against real legal, political, economic, and social limits on women's freedom. Feminist movements helped change law, work, family life, sexuality, and the public understanding of power. But the singular word "feminism" hides a basic difficulty: there are many feminisms, and they disagree about equality, sexual difference, patriarchy, family, work, sexuality, race, class, and gender. The male side requires even more care. Fathers' movements, men's liberation, masculinity studies, men's-rights activism, therapeutic movements, and anti-feminist currents do not form one political family, and not all of them are masculinist. In this book, masculinism will refer more narrowly to currents that place men's problems inside a political account in which feminism, women, or a social order allegedly organized for women become central causes. Treating

“feminism” and “masculinism” as two symmetrical doctrines would create a clean debate. It would also distort the history.

The purpose of this book is not to decide which camp wins. It is to understand what their confrontation reveals about changing relations between the sexes. Women experienced forms of subordination that cannot be dissolved into a search for artificial balance. For long periods, they had fewer legal rights, less control over property, more restricted access to political power and certain professions, less authority over sexuality and reproduction, and forms of institutional dependence on men. Recognizing that asymmetry does not require a story in which all men were sovereign beneficiaries consciously designing an order against all women.

The same societies that granted men greater authority could also impose distinctive duties on them: to provide, protect, fight, take risks, endure, compete, and succeed. Those demands did not cancel women’s subordination. They show something more complicated: a social order can distribute power and cost at the same time, and neither distribution maps neatly onto a moral opposition between a guilty sex and an innocent one. That distinction prevents two opposite mistakes without pretending that the historical situations themselves were symmetrical. The first mistake is to answer women’s inequality with male suffering, as though one disproved the other. Men’s exposure to war, dangerous work, or particular family obligations does not retroactively turn women’s legal or economic disabilities into equality.

The second mistake is to assume that because the overall order was more strongly organized around male authority, specific burdens borne by men must have been secondary, voluntary, or politically meaningless. A structure can advantage a group in

some respects while demanding costly behavior from its members. An individual can belong to a statistically advantaged category and still possess little power in his own life. Complexity does not neutralize criticism. It makes criticism more precise.

Concepts such as domination, patriarchy, socialization, and the reproduction of norms will remain useful, but they will not provide the skeleton of the book. Thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu will appear when they clarify a specific mechanism—for example, the way learned norms can come to feel natural—and then be tested against history, feminist disagreement, social change, and male vulnerabilities. The book is first about feminisms, men's movements, and masculinisms. Theories matter here only to the extent that they help us understand those objects. The same rule applies to any powerful framework.

If every relationship between the sexes is translated immediately into the language of dominant and dominated, male obligations can appear only as the secondary price of privilege, women's agency can be underestimated, and historical change can be reduced to the persistence of one structure. A framework centered on male costs can fail in the opposite direction, losing sight of the historical asymmetries that constrained women. In both cases, the concept should illuminate reality, not protect itself from it.

This becomes especially important in contemporary societies because norms change at different speeds. A society can ask men to do more household and care work while still judging them heavily by economic success. It can defend women's sexual autonomy while retaining different expectations for men and women in courtship. It can dismantle some female obligations more explicitly than male ones. It can reject

traditional male authority while continuing to reward traits that historically accompanied it: initiative, protection, endurance, competitiveness, or willingness to take risks. These contradictions do not prove that feminism failed. They do not prove that masculinism is broadly correct. They show that a normative revolution does not produce a coherent replacement system overnight.

Masculinist arguments often begin in precisely these zones of mismatch. Some point to problems that deserve analysis in their own right: male mortality, suicide, educational difficulties, dangerous work, the position of some fathers after separation, loneliness, or the difficulty many men have in expressing vulnerability. Other currents turn those problems into a general indictment of feminism or women and attribute to female emancipation outcomes with much more complicated causes. A real problem does not make the first explanation offered for it true. That rule must apply equally to feminism. Sexual violence, discrimination, reproductive constraints, and inequalities at work do not become unreal because some feminist arguments overgeneralize, essentialize men, or confuse correlation, structure, and intention. A theory can reveal major injustices and still be wrong in some of its extensions. A movement can achieve important reforms without making every idea expressed in its name true.

Once that distinction collapses, camp logic takes over. Any criticism of feminism becomes an attack on women; any criticism of masculinism becomes denial of male suffering. This book starts from the opposite premise: a trustworthy body of thought must be correctable without losing the realities it correctly brought into view. Collective language creates another problem. “Men” and “women” are necessary categories for

studying many social distributions. They become dangerous when we assign them a common intention. Men never formed a single historical subject collectively meeting to organize the domination of women. Women never formed a homogeneous group with identical interests, material conditions, experiences, or values. Sex relations intersect with class, age, generation, race, ethnicity, culture, family structure, health, education, and other institutions. That does not prevent us from discussing male domination, gender norms, or sex inequality. It requires us to distinguish social structure from personal guilt and statistical tendency from individual destiny.

That distinction will matter most where comparison becomes irresistible. Who works more? Who suffers more? Who experiences more violence? Who is favored by the justice system, schools, the labor market, or family arrangements? Asked globally, these questions usually produce a competition for victimhood rather than knowledge. Indicators do not measure the same things. Costs are not directly commensurable. Causes differ from one domain to another. Men's overrepresentation in workplace deaths does not erase women's reproductive burden. Women's overrepresentation among many victims of sexual violence does not erase forms of violence that more often affect men. The goal will therefore not be to construct a ledger proving that one sex is globally privileged or globally sacrificed. It will be to understand the mechanisms producing each distribution.

Contemporary culture war pushes in the opposite direction. Social media, activist spaces, and parts of the media economy reward simple stories, antagonistic identities, and generalizations that turn personal experience into political proof. One violent experience becomes a theory of men. One

bitter divorce becomes a theory of women. One statistic becomes the final argument for an ideology. Each camp selects cases that confirm its picture of the world and uses the excesses of the other as evidence. The most anti-male feminism feeds the most anti-feminist masculinism; the latter then supplies the former with new examples of misogyny. The loop is not only rhetorical. It can change expectations in dating, trust between partners, interpretations of conflict, and eventually the relationships themselves.

Leaving that loop does not mean manufacturing reconciliation. Some disagreements are real. Some claims are incompatible. Some norms should disappear rather than be balanced. Biological differences exist, and their effects must be distinguished from those of education and social organization. Some traditions created stability while also creating dependence. Some reforms expand freedom while generating new costs or uncertainties. A serious inquiry should not resolve those tensions before examining them. It should allow a conclusion to be asymmetrical in one domain and different in another. The hypothesis guiding this book is therefore simple, but it is not treated as a result already proved. Women's emancipation and men's emancipation do not have to be rival projects. They become rivals when one person's freedom is imagined as another person's loss; when one group's suffering is used to invalidate the other's; when history becomes inherited guilt; or when equality is confused with erasing real differences, tradeoffs, and costs.

The task is to see how far that hypothesis survives contact with history, evidence, competing theories, and contemporary contradictions. We will begin with the world that gave rise to feminism, then follow its formation around rights, citizenship,

education, and suffrage. From there we will trace the multiplication of feminist traditions and the transformations they helped produce. The male side will enter through men's liberation and other men's movements, their later divisions, and the emergence of contemporary masculinisms and the manosphere. Only after that double history will we test competing narratives against evidence on education, health, work, violence, criminal justice, parenthood, loneliness, and sexuality. We can then return to the normative question: what forms of emancipation can make women and men freer without turning either into the instrument of the other?

CHAPTER 1 — The World That Gave Rise to Feminism

Feminism did not appear in a vacuum. It took shape in societies where women and men did not occupy the same legal, political, economic, and family positions—but where those differences did not form one simple, uniform system shared by every class, country, or household. Two easy stories have to be resisted from the beginning. The first imagines an old world of total and unbroken male domination in which every man possessed power and every woman lacked agency. The second stresses complementary roles, male obligations, and historical diversity so heavily that the basic asymmetries disappear. Neither is good enough.

Women could work, own some forms of property, manage businesses, inherit, organize, write, petition, and sometimes exercise substantial influence while still living inside institutions that gave men greater formal authority. Men could hold legal or political privileges while also being assigned costly duties as providers, soldiers, protectors, or dangerous workers. The existence of those male duties did not make women's legal disabilities unreal. The existence of female agency did not make legal hierarchy imaginary. The world that gave rise to feminism has to be studied at that level of precision. This chapter therefore uses a transatlantic frame rather than pretending that “the West” had one legal order. France provides a particularly clear example of codified marital hierarchy. Britain shows a different common-law path, especially around married women's property. The United States adds another layer: many questions of marriage, property, divorce, custody, and professional access developed through state law rather than one national code.[1]

The point is not to assemble three parallel timelines. It is to identify recurring tensions that made feminist politics increasingly thinkable: universal rights proclaimed alongside political exclusion; women's real economic activity alongside legal dependence; expanding education alongside sex-specific curricula and professional barriers; and social roles presented as natural while industrialization, literacy, urbanization, and political reform were already changing the conditions under which those roles operated. France makes the old hierarchy unusually visible because the Civil Code of 1804 gave it a national legal form. The husband owed protection to his wife; the wife owed obedience to her husband. The husband held superior authority in the household and bore primary responsibility for supporting it, while the wife faced important restrictions on independent legal and property action.[2][3]

That arrangement should not be caricatured. A married woman was not literally reduced to the legal status of a child. Nor did every woman occupy the same position. A widow could sometimes manage property or a business with greater independence than a married woman. An unmarried adult woman did not necessarily fall under the same marital authorization regime. The central institution was marriage itself: it reorganized legal capacities around a household in which the husband was explicitly recognized as the senior legal actor. The same architecture also assigned men duties.

A husband's authority was linked to an expectation that he represent and support the family.[3] The old order distributed power and obligation together. That does not convert inequality into hidden equality. An obligation to provide is not the same thing as a restriction on one's legal capacity. But it matters because later reforms would not merely remove privileges from

men; they would also destabilize the role to which those privileges had been attached. Divorce shows another aspect of the same structure. Revolutionary France introduced divorce in 1792, the Restoration abolished it in 1816, and the Naquet law restored it in 1884 under limited fault-based conditions.[4] For long periods, marriage was therefore difficult or impossible to dissolve legally. That burden applied formally to both spouses, but it could operate differently when spouses entered marriage with unequal property rights, employment options, or legal standing.

Britain followed another path. Under common-law doctrines associated with coverture, marriage could sharply limit a wife's independent control of property. Parliament's historical materials describe the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 as major stages in restoring married women's control over earnings and property.[5] Again, the change was gradual. "Married woman" and "independent property holder" did not become fully compatible through one clean break. The United States was more fragmented still. The Law Library of Congress emphasizes that state materials differ in terminology, precedent, and the rights they regulate, including married women's property law and admission to professions.[1] New York's Married Women's Property Act of 1848 is a useful example because it shows reform happening inside one state rather than through a fictional national emancipation statute. The National Park Service notes that the law permitted married women to hold property separately from their husbands and later allowed Frances Seward to own land in her own name.[6]

Other states changed at different times and in different ways. That variation is not a minor technicality. It changes the story. There is no honest sentence of the form "American married

women gained property rights in year X.” Property, contracts, earnings, divorce, custody, and access to professions were governed through different bodies of law. A woman’s legal position depended not only on sex and marital status but also on jurisdiction. Yet the larger direction is visible across these distinct systems. Liberal societies increasingly treated adult legal agency as a status that required justification when restricted. Once that principle gained strength, marriage became harder to defend as a reason why one adult should lose capacities another adult retained.

Feminism would eventually turn that contradiction into a political program. But the contradiction existed before the movement had a stable name. Political exclusion made the contradiction even sharper. It would be misleading to imagine the early nineteenth century as a world in which “men” were universally enfranchised and “women” were universally excluded. Political rights were stratified by property, wealth, race, age, status, and jurisdiction. Many men lacked the vote. The expansion of democracy was itself incomplete and uneven. But sex remained a durable line of exclusion even as political systems broadened participation among men.

In the United States, the Constitution adopted in 1787 did not create one universal national electorate. Voting rules developed largely through the states. After the Civil War, the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited denial or abridgment of voting rights on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude and was ratified in 1870.[7] Its adoption was a major constitutional expansion of Black male citizenship. It did not create effective universal male suffrage. The National Archives documents how poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, intimidation, and other state and local devices were later used to disenfranchise

Black men, particularly after Reconstruction.[7][8] The political history of American men was therefore divided by race as well as by class, state, and period.

This matters for the history of feminism because the phrase “women were excluded while men could vote” is simultaneously directionally true and historically incomplete. Sex was a barrier. So were other barriers. The political category “men” contained people with radically different access to citizenship. A white male property holder in one period, an immigrant man in another, a formerly enslaved Black man during Reconstruction, and a Black citizen facing Jim Crow disenfranchisement did not occupy the same political position. The feminist problem emerged not from the claim that every man possessed equal power, but from a more precise contradiction: political systems could present the expansion of male citizenship as democratization while continuing to treat sex as a legitimate reason for excluding women.

As the language of equal citizenship grew stronger, the burden of justification began to shift. If political legitimacy rested on consent, reason, and citizenship, why should sex alone bar participation? That question would become one of the organizing forces of the women’s-rights movement. Education created a similar paradox. Women were not simply uneducated until a feminist movement arrived. Girls and women learned in homes, religious institutions, local schools, academies, and private settings long before equal access to higher education became common. The important issue is not whether women ever received education. It is what kind, at what level, for what purpose, and with access to which credentials and professions.

France again provides a clear institutional example. The Camille Sée law of 1880 created public secondary education for girls, but

the curriculum was explicitly designed around a different expected social destination than the curriculum for boys. Certain classical subjects were reduced or excluded, and the education of girls remained linked to their anticipated family role.[9] The reform was progressive and restrictive at the same time. It widened access to formal schooling while preserving the idea that male and female education should prepare students for different futures. Later reforms would continue to narrow that gap, but the example shows why access alone is not identical to equality. American education followed no single national sequence either.

Oberlin offers an unusually early counterexample to exclusion. The institution was coeducational from its founding in 1833, regularly admitted Black students beginning in 1835, admitted women to its baccalaureate program in 1837, and granted bachelor's degrees to women in 1841.[10] Mary Jane Patterson later graduated from Oberlin in 1862 and became the first Black woman known to earn a bachelor's degree from an American college.[10] Oberlin should not be mistaken for the United States as a whole. Its importance lies in the opposite fact: it shows that exclusion was neither technically necessary nor universally accepted even while higher education remained strongly sex- and race-segregated elsewhere. Education could reproduce social roles and destabilize them at the same time.

A curriculum might teach girls to become better wives and mothers. But literacy and advanced schooling also enabled women to read law, keep accounts, publish, teach, organize associations, enter professions, and challenge claims of intellectual incapacity. A society could expand female education for conservative reasons and still create women better equipped to criticize conservative institutions. That is one of the recurring

mechanisms of social change. Institutions designed to preserve an order can also create capacities that make the order harder to justify. The history of work is distorted when female emancipation is narrated as the moment women “entered the workforce.” Women had always worked. They labored in agriculture, family businesses, domestic service, workshops, textile production, street commerce, home-based production, retail, and countless informal or seasonal activities. What changed was not the invention of female labor but the organization, visibility, legal treatment, and social meaning of work.

Historical research has repeatedly shown how women’s economic activity could disappear from categories built around formal employment or male household heads. Work performed in a household economy could be essential without being counted as a separate occupation. A wife’s labor in a shop, farm, or home workshop could be economically productive while remaining legally or statistically attached to the family.[11][12] Industrialization changed that relationship. As production moved into factories and wage labor became more visible, the boundary between “home” and “work” hardened in some sectors. But women were present in industrial labor from the beginning. In nineteenth-century Britain, women formed a large share of the textile workforce. Factory legislation often treated women alongside children and young persons as categories requiring special protection, limiting hours or certain kinds of work.[13]

In the United States, women also organized as workers long before twentieth-century feminism. The Library of Congress records the United Tailoresses of New York, founded in 1825 and striking for higher wages in 1831, and the Lowell Female

Labor Reform Association, founded in 1845.[14] These organizations do not make women's labor activism synonymous with feminism. They show that women were already acting collectively around wages and working conditions inside the same century in which women's-rights politics took shape. The ideal of "separate spheres" therefore has to be handled carefully.

The image of the man in public economic life and the woman in the domestic sphere was influential, especially in parts of the middle class. It was a powerful norm. It was not a census of all families.[15] Poor women could not simply withdraw from paid or productive work. Widows and unmarried women often needed independent income. Farm families and small businesses relied on the labor of multiple household members. Domestic production itself was work, even when the language of the period treated it as female duty rather than economic activity. The distinction between norm and reality matters. A society can idealize women as homemakers while employing large numbers of them. It can celebrate the male breadwinner while relying on women's earnings to sustain working-class households. It can praise complementary roles while economic necessity repeatedly crosses the boundary between them.

This is where the male breadwinner ideal becomes analytically important. The model associates masculinity with the ability to support a wife and children economically. When a household genuinely depends on a man's income, that role can give him bargaining power and public status. It can also turn economic success into a test of masculine worth. A man unable to provide may be judged as failing at a central duty of his sex. Once again, cost and subordination should not be confused. The provider role can be burdensome without making men legally

subordinate to women. The domestic role can be honored symbolically while leaving women economically dependent. A social system can give one role more authority while imposing costly expectations on both.

Industrial work made these differences visible in another way. Men and women were often concentrated in different sectors. Women could dominate or be heavily represented in textiles, domestic service, and particular manufacturing jobs. Men were more heavily represented in mining, heavy industry, construction, transport, and other physically dangerous work. Protective labor laws sometimes barred women from specific occupations or limited their hours, improving safety in one sense while also reinforcing sex-specific economic categories. [13] There is no useful way to add these differences into a single historical score. Higher wages, occupational authority, physical danger, legal dependency, instability, unpaid care, and public status are not commensurable. The task is to identify how the division of labor worked and what it required from each sex.

Military obligation makes the same point from another angle. France's conscription system provides an especially clear case. The Jourdan law of 1798 established conscription, and different forms of compulsory military service shaped French male citizenship for generations.[16] Women were excluded from formal political power for much of the period while men were more directly subject to military obligation. That asymmetry can be interpreted badly in two opposite directions. One mistake is to treat exclusion from military service as proof that women were privileged. Military exclusion was historically linked to the same conception of women as dependent, protected, and less fully civic. A person deemed unfit for the duties of citizenship could also be deemed unfit for its powers.

The opposite mistake is to treat male conscription as politically irrelevant because men held more formal authority. Compulsory service was a real sex-specific obligation. It exposed men to discipline, injury, and death on terms women did not share. The correct conclusion is not symmetry. It is that citizenship itself was gendered. Men's greater political inclusion could be connected to expectations of military service, provision, and public responsibility. Women's exclusion from those duties could be connected to their exclusion from public authority. Rights and obligations were distributed through a model of different social functions rather than through an abstract ledger of advantages. The United States does not need an invented equivalent in this chapter. Its military history followed another legal and political path. The French case already performs the needed function: it demonstrates that a male-dominant civic order could impose specifically male duties at the same time that it denied women equal civic standing.

Reproduction created a more fundamental asymmetry. Women become pregnant, give birth, and historically bore the immediate physical risks of pregnancy and childbirth. In societies with limited contraception, higher maternal mortality, and larger families, those realities could shape women's lives more directly and repeatedly than they do for many women today.[17] But biology does not explain an entire social order. Pregnancy does not decide who may vote. It does not decide whether a married woman controls her wages, whether a daughter studies philosophy, whether a widow can operate a business, or whether a profession is legally closed to women. Biological difference can create practical constraints; institutions decide how those constraints are organized, supported, amplified, or converted into legal hierarchy.

The same is true of physical differences in work. Average sex differences in strength or reproductive function can matter in some occupations and life stages. They cannot by themselves justify a general political incapacity or a universal rule about intellectual competence. This distinction would become central to feminist thought: identifying where a difference is material, where it has been socially magnified, and where it is being used to justify an institution that does not logically follow from it. By the late nineteenth century, older arrangements had already begun to loosen.

A woman might receive more education while remaining legally constrained in marriage. She might earn wages without enjoying the same control over them as an unmarried man. She might participate in a reform organization but remain unable to vote. She might work in an industrial economy that depended on her labor while political and legal language still treated male provision as the normal foundation of family life. Partial reform made remaining inequalities more visible. France offers a clear example: married women gained stronger rights over their own earnings in 1907, decades after women's paid labor had become economically significant.[18] The reform did not create female work. It changed the legal relationship between work and control.

The same pattern appeared elsewhere in different forms. One institution changed, exposing contradiction in another. Education raised expectations that professional restrictions then frustrated. Property reform made political exclusion more conspicuous. Wage labor weakened the claim that women's natural economic role was exclusively domestic. Emancipation rarely proceeds as a smooth line. It produces mismatches. Those mismatches are politically fertile because they make old

justifications harder to sustain. Movements also require more than grievances. They need people who know how to organize. Here the American connection between abolitionism and women's rights is particularly important. The National Park Service documents that several organizers and participants in the 1848 Seneca Falls convention were active in antislavery work. Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martha Wright, Mary Ann M'Clintock, Jane Hunt, and others operated inside reform networks in which abolitionism, religious dissent, temperance, and political agitation overlapped.[19][20]

Those networks mattered not only because they supplied ideas about equality. They taught practical politics. Women involved in antislavery work learned to circulate petitions, raise money, organize meetings, publish arguments, address mixed audiences, coordinate supporters, and endure public hostility. Frederick Douglass, a formerly enslaved abolitionist and newspaper editor, attended the Seneca Falls convention and supported the demand for women's suffrage.[19] The relationship should not be romanticized. Abolitionism and early women's-rights activism both contained racism and exclusion. The National Park Service explicitly notes that the movements shared egalitarian commitments while also reproducing discriminatory practices toward African Americans.[20] The coalition between causes was real, but so were its limits. That tension is essential.

The political category "women" never represented one undifferentiated experience. An educated white reformer seeking married women's property rights did not live the same life as an enslaved woman, a free Black woman facing racial discrimination, a factory worker, a farm laborer, a domestic servant, or an immigrant woman. Sex could be a common axis

of legal and social constraint without erasing those differences. This is also why race cannot be added to the history as a modern statistical checkbox. In the nineteenth-century United States, slavery, emancipation, citizenship, racial violence, and disenfranchisement were constitutive institutions. Black women encountered sex hierarchy inside a racial order that shaped legal status, family life, bodily autonomy, labor, and political participation in ways that were not captured by the experience of white middle-class reformers.

The early women's-rights movement would have to confront that fact repeatedly—sometimes productively, sometimes badly. By the end of the nineteenth century, the social landscape had changed substantially without becoming equal. Women were economically active, but work remained strongly sex-segregated and often unequally valued. Education expanded, but curricula, credentials, and professional access remained differentiated. Married women's property rights advanced in Britain and many American states, while family law continued to carry older assumptions. Political systems broadened citizenship in some directions while preserving sex exclusion and, in the United States, allowing severe racial disenfranchisement to persist. The importance of this world lies in the connections it made possible. As long as girls' education, married women's property, access to professions, political representation, and family authority could be treated as separate questions, each restriction could receive its own traditional justification.

Feminism would increasingly connect them. The shared claim was not that women and men were identical in every respect. It was that sex by itself was not a sufficient reason to deny civil capacity, education, political voice, property control, or intellectual standing. That step changes the burden of proof.

Instead of asking why women should be allowed into an institution built for men, reformers could begin asking why the institution was entitled to exclude them in the first place. The shift was not invented by one thinker, one convention, or one nation. It emerged through a long argument among writers, activists, workers, reformers, and political movements across different societies. That is why feminism has more than one plausible birthday.

It begins intellectually when universal principles are turned against sex-based exclusions. It begins socially when women acquire the education, networks, resources, and public presence needed to organize. It begins politically when scattered demands become durable campaigns. And it becomes an identity when a name begins to link those causes together. The next chapter follows that transformation: from criticism of particular injustices to organized movements for women's rights, citizenship, education, and suffrage.

NOTES

[1] Law Library of Congress, "State Law Resources — American Women." Used for the diversity of state law governing married women's property and other legal rights.

[2] French Senate, historical materials on the Civil Code and the 1965 reform of matrimonial regimes. Used for Article 213 and the historical hierarchy between spouses.

[3] French Senate, 2026 report on the institution of marriage. Used for the husband's historical responsibility for household support and determination of family residence under French law.

[4] French National Assembly, historical report on divorce. Used for divorce in 1792, abolition in 1816, and restoration in 1884.

[5] UK Parliament, "Marriage: property and children." Used for the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 and the gradual expansion of married women's property control.

[6] U.S. National Park Service, "William H. Seward." Used for the New York Married Women's Property Act of 1848 and Frances Seward's separate ownership of land.

- [7] U.S. National Archives, “15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Voting Rights (1870).” Used for ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment and the later use of legal devices to disenfranchise Black voters.
- [8] U.S. National Archives, “Black Americans and the Vote.” Used for the persistence of poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, intimidation, and other barriers after formal constitutional expansion of voting rights.
- [9] French Senate, “Loi du 21 décembre 1880 sur l’enseignement secondaire des jeunes filles.” Used for the Camille Sée law and sex-differentiated secondary education in France.
- [10] Oberlin College, “Oberlin History.” Used for coeducation from 1833, regular admission of Black students beginning in 1835, women’s admission to the baccalaureate program in 1837, women’s bachelor’s degrees in 1841, and Mary Jane Patterson’s 1862 graduation.
- [11] Bibliothèque nationale de France, historical materials on women’s work in nineteenth-century Paris. Used to establish women’s extensive economic activity in workshops, manufacturing, commerce, services, streets, and home production.
- [12] Comparative Studies in Society and History, research on women’s work and family in nineteenth-century Europe. Used against the simplistic narrative that women entered economic activity only with modern wage labor.
- [13] UK Parliament, historical materials on nineteenth-century factory legislation. Used for women’s large presence in textiles, protective labor regulation, and sex differentiation in industrial work.
- [14] Library of Congress, “Garment & Textile Unions — Organized Labor Since the 19th Century.” Used for the United Tailoresses of New York and the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association.
- [15] The Historical Journal, research on the “separate spheres” framework in nineteenth-century women’s history. Used to treat separate spheres as a powerful prescriptive ideal rather than a complete description of women’s lives.
- [16] Service historique de la Défense, materials on French military service since the Revolution. Used for the Jourdan law and the long history of male conscription in France.
- [17] Oxford Academic, historical research on maternal mortality and reproductive risk. Used only for the general historical claim that pregnancy and childbirth imposed significant bodily risks before modern reproductive and medical conditions.
- [18] French Senate, “Femmes et Pouvoirs XIXe-XXe siècles.” Used for the 1907 reform strengthening married women’s control of their earnings.
- [19] U.S. National Park Service, Women’s Rights National Historical Park. Used for the participation of abolitionists in the 1848 Seneca Falls convention, the role of reform organizing, and Frederick Douglass’s attendance and support.
- [20] U.S. National Park Service, “A Great Inheritance: Introduction” and related materials on abolition and women’s rights. Used for the organizational influence of

abolitionism and for the documented presence of racism and exclusion inside both reform movements.

CHAPTER 2 — How Feminism Became a Movement: Rights, Citizenship, Education, Suffrage

Feminism was not born on one morning, in one country, under one name. It is easy to choose a symbolic beginning: Olympe de Gouges in 1791, Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, the Seneca Falls convention in 1848, or the late nineteenth century, when the word feminism itself became part of organized political language in France. Each date captures something real. None is the origin of a movement already complete. Before there was feminism as an organized identity, there were arguments against women's legal and intellectual inferiority. Before those arguments formed a durable movement, they appeared inside disputes about education, citizenship, property, marriage, representation, labor, slavery, and the meaning of human reason.

Modern feminism emerges when those grievances begin to connect. A restriction on women's education can be treated as one isolated tradition. So can married women's property law, exclusion from the vote, barriers to professions, or unequal authority in marriage. But once those restrictions are interpreted as different expressions of the same underlying question—whether sex is a sufficient reason to limit a person's civil, political, or intellectual standing—they become easier to organize into a common politics. That process took decades. It crossed national borders. It also produced disagreement from the beginning. The intellectual problem appears before the political movement. Enlightenment and revolutionary arguments increasingly claimed that legitimate authority should rest on principles that sounded universal: reason, natural rights,

equality before law, consent, citizenship. Yet the people recognized as full political subjects were still restricted by sex, property, race, class, and legal status.

Women therefore presented a problem for universalist theory. If rights belong to human beings because they are rational and capable of moral judgment, why should women be excluded from those rights as a sex? Nicolas de Condorcet made the contradiction explicit in 1790 when he argued for women's admission to citizenship.[1] In revolutionary France, Olympe de Gouges used the language of rights against the exclusions built into the new political order. Her 1791 Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen deliberately reworked revolutionary claims in order to expose the gap between proclaimed universality and women's civic position.[2] Neither figure founded feminism by decree. Their importance lies in a method of argument that would become central: take a principle already accepted in general, then ask why sex should suspend it.

Mary Wollstonecraft pushed that method into education and moral development. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, she rejected the idea that women's apparent intellectual or moral weakness proved a natural incapacity. If girls were educated for dependency, ornament, and pleasing men, the resulting behavior could not simply be cited as evidence that women were naturally suited to dependency.[3] Education therefore became more than access to information. It became part of the causal argument. A social order could create traits and then call them nature. That insight would survive far beyond Wollstonecraft's own political and philosophical framework. Later feminisms would disagree radically about what counts as biological difference, social construction, or

liberation. But the challenge was already present: before using observed difference to justify hierarchy, ask how the difference was produced.

Arguments do not become movements merely because they are persuasive. A political movement needs networks, publications, money, meeting places, organizational habits, shared language, and people willing to turn private grievance into public demand. The American women's-rights movement makes this transition unusually visible. In July 1848, organizers held a women's-rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The Declaration of Sentiments adopted there modeled its political language on the Declaration of Independence and listed grievances concerning civil status, property, education, work, religion, and political participation. The convention also endorsed woman suffrage, a demand that remained controversial even among reformers.[4] Seneca Falls matters greatly. It should not be turned into a creation myth.

Women had argued for rights before 1848. Reform organizing existed before 1848. The convention did not represent every American woman. It did not instantly create a unified national movement. Its significance lies in a change of scale: claims that could be treated as isolated objections were assembled into a public program, debated collectively, signed, circulated, and tied to continued organization. The event also shows why movements rarely grow from one issue alone. Many Seneca Falls organizers and participants were already involved in abolitionism. The National Park Service documents how antislavery work gave women experience in petitioning, fundraising, speaking publicly, organizing meetings, building reform networks, and defending politically radical claims.[5] Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist editor and former slave,

attended the convention and supported the suffrage resolution.
[5]

Abolitionism did not mechanically produce feminism. It provided an organizational and moral environment in which some women confronted the contradiction between campaigning for universal freedom and accepting their own political subordination. That connection came with its own contradictions. The antislavery and women's-rights movements both contained racism and exclusion. White women's experiences could be treated as though they represented women in general. Black women lived at the intersection of institutions that cannot be reduced to one axis: slavery and its aftermath, racial exclusion, sex hierarchy, labor exploitation, family disruption, and restricted citizenship.[6] The lesson is not that sex ceased to matter because race mattered. It is that "women" was never a socially uniform category, even when sex-based restrictions affected women as a class.

The movement would spend the next century repeatedly rediscovering that problem. American public memory often gives Seneca Falls a special place for good reason. The National Park Service describes the 1848 gathering as the first convention held for the purpose of discussing the social, civil, religious condition and rights of women, and as a beginning of the organized women's-rights movement in the United States.[7] The useful word is beginning, not birth. A movement can begin organizationally after its arguments already exist. It can have several local beginnings. It can become visible before it becomes durable. It can also later remember one event more clearly than others because that event supplies a powerful story.

The Declaration of Sentiments itself illustrates this mixture of continuity and innovation. Its form borrowed the moral

authority of an existing national text. Its grievances, however, turned that form against exclusions accepted by the society that revered the original Declaration. The claim that “all men and women are created equal” was not an abstract philosophical exercise. It linked suffrage, legal status, education, profession, property, religion, and public voice.[4] That act of linking is one of the crucial steps in feminist history. When different restrictions are interpreted as connected, reform stops being a collection of exceptions and begins to look like a political movement. Across the Atlantic, British campaigns developed under a different legal and political system.

Property reform illustrates the gradual nature of change. The Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 recognized important rights over earnings and property, and the 1882 Act extended married women’s control further.[8] Neither law can be treated as one moment of complete equality. Their significance lies in the erosion of a marital order in which a wife’s independent property standing could be sharply constrained. The suffrage campaign followed another long path. British women’s suffrage cannot be reduced to the most dramatic image of the suffragette. Petitions, public meetings, lobbying, writing, local organization, constitutional campaigning, civil disobedience, and internal strategic disputes all preceded the vote. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 enfranchised many women but did not put women and men on equal electoral terms. Equal parliamentary voting rights arrived in 1928.[9]

This distinction matters because “women won the vote in 1918” is both familiar and incomplete. Legal reform often arrives in stages. The symbolic date remains useful only if it does not erase the conditions attached to it. The United States would face the same problem in a different form. The campaign for woman

suffrage in the United States lasted generations. The National Archives notes that a federal woman-suffrage amendment was first introduced in Congress in 1878, passed both houses in 1919, and was ratified in 1920.[10] The Nineteenth Amendment prohibited the federal government and the states from denying the vote on account of sex. That constitutional change was enormous. It was not the same as universal effective enfranchisement.

The National Archives explicitly warns that ratification did not ensure full access to the ballot for all women. Discriminatory laws and practices continued to prevent many women—especially Black women in the South—from voting in practice. [10][11] Poll taxes, literacy tests, intimidation, racial violence, and other mechanisms used to suppress Black voting did not disappear because sex discrimination in voting had been constitutionally prohibited. This is where the history of women’s suffrage and the history of racial citizenship have to be held together without collapsing one into the other. The Fifteenth Amendment had prohibited race-based denial of voting rights to male citizens in 1870, yet Black men were subsequently disenfranchised through state laws and violence. [12] The Nineteenth Amendment removed sex as a constitutional basis for denying the vote, but it did not dismantle all the racial mechanisms that already restricted access.

A Black woman in the Jim Crow South therefore could not be described accurately by saying simply that “women gained the vote in 1920.” Sex exclusion changed. Racial disenfranchisement remained. This does not reduce the importance of the Nineteenth Amendment. It defines it more precisely. Formal equality is a necessary historical achievement. It is not always

the same thing as effective access. The French sequence differs again. Feminist ideas and women's-rights activism existed before feminism became a stable political label. The history of the word matters because it prevents us from projecting later identities backward. Historian Karen Offen traces an early French use of *féministe* to Alexandre Dumas fils in 1872, in a derogatory context, before Hubertine Auclert used and helped politicize the term in the early 1880s.[13] That chronology does not mean feminist politics began in 1882. It means a label capable of linking existing demands acquired a new political life.

Hubertine Auclert is important precisely at that transition. She campaigned for women's suffrage, used journalism and organization to press civil and political claims, and treated women's exclusion from the vote as a central barrier to reform. [14] Her politics made explicit a question that gradualists could postpone: if women lack political power, how long must they depend on a male electorate to correct laws governing women's lives? French feminism developed through organizations, newspapers, republican and socialist networks, liberal reform, and internal strategic disputes.[15] Some activists prioritized civil reform, education, work, or family law. Others placed suffrage at the center. Male allies were part of this history too. Léon Richer, Condorcet earlier, and John Stuart Mill in Britain are reminders that women's emancipation was never literally a biological war of women against men.

France also illustrates how late some formal political rights could arrive. Women received the right to vote and stand for election under the ordinance of April 21, 1944, and participated in elections in 1945.[16] By then, women had been active in education, employment, journalism, reform organizations,

unions, and public life for generations. Again, political citizenship did not create women's social existence. It changed the legal status of participation. One reason feminism became a movement rather than a single-issue campaign is that reforms in one domain exposed restrictions in another.

Education created women who could read the law, publish arguments, obtain credentials, and enter public debate. Property reform could give a married woman greater economic standing while leaving her politically voiceless. Paid work could make women's contribution to household income undeniable while employment rules and professions remained sex-segregated. Participation in abolition, temperance, labor, religious reform, or socialism could teach organizational skills while the organizations themselves reproduced male authority. Each partial opening generated a new contradiction. The woman who could earn money asked why she could not fully control it. The woman who could study asked why her sex closed a profession. The woman who could organize petitions asked why she could not vote on the law she was petitioning.

The woman who could be punished as an individual under law asked why she was not represented as an individual in political life. These questions did not produce one ideological answer. Some feminists appealed to sameness: women possess the same rational and civic capacities as men and therefore deserve equal rights. Others appealed to difference: women's particular experiences, moral influence, maternal roles, or social contributions should be represented rather than erased. Some sought entry into existing institutions. Others increasingly questioned the institutions themselves. Those tensions were present before later feminisms gave them more elaborate names. The expansion of feminist organization also created a

representational problem. Who could claim to speak for women?

Early organized movements often drew disproportionately from people with education, social networks, time, and access to print culture. That did not make their claims about sex discrimination false. It did mean that the political subject “women” could be built from experiences that were not universal. A middle-class woman seeking independent property control did not confront the same immediate problem as a woman working long hours for wages. A white suffragist did not occupy the same political position as a Black woman confronting both sex discrimination and racial exclusion. An employer and a domestic servant could both be women while having directly conflicting economic interests. A woman in an industrial city, a farm household, an immigrant community, or an enslaved family lived under different institutions.

A mature feminism therefore had to do two things at once: identify restrictions that operated on the basis of sex and resist the temptation to treat one group of women as the natural representative of all women. The movement did not solve that problem in the nineteenth century. It inherited it. Later Black, socialist, labor, lesbian, postcolonial, and other feminist traditions would force the question into the center of feminist theory. But the historical problem was already visible at the movement’s birth: unity was politically necessary, yet the category being unified was internally divided. Another simplification should be rejected. Feminism was not created by women alone acting against men as a sex.

Condorcet argued for women’s citizenship. Frederick Douglass supported the suffrage resolution at Seneca Falls. John Stuart Mill publicly advocated women’s political and civil equality in

Britain. Male reformers participated in organizations, wrote arguments, signed petitions, and voted on the legislation through which legal change eventually occurred.[1][5][17] That does not mean men deserve equal credit for a movement largely driven by women confronting their own subordination. It means the political line was never perfectly biological. Some women opposed women's suffrage. Some men supported it. Class, religion, party, region, race, and ideology divided both sexes. Sex shaped interests and institutions without determining every individual political position. This is important because later sex-war narratives often rewrite the past into two coherent armies.

History is less convenient. The earliest feminist campaigns did not merely win particular reforms. They changed what required justification. In an older legal order, sex hierarchy could be defended by tradition, family function, custom, religion, assumed natural difference, or the simple fact that institutions had always been organized that way. The women's-rights movement reversed the question. Why should a woman's sex prevent her from controlling property? Why should it determine the education she receives? Why should it bar her from a profession? Why should marriage reduce her independent legal capacity? Why should citizenship be defined through men? Once those questions become legitimate, restriction has to defend itself. That is a deeper political shift than any single statute.

It does not prove that every difference between women and men is unjust. It does not require identical life choices or identical outcomes. It establishes a more limited but powerful principle: sex alone is not a sufficient explanation for a general civic incapacity. That principle now sounds ordinary in liberal

democracies. It did not sound ordinary when reformers first pressed it against institutions built on explicit distinctions between male and female roles. The history therefore resists a single birthday. Feminism is born intellectually when universal principles are applied to women against institutions that exclude them. It is born socially when women acquire enough education, economic presence, networks, and public voice to sustain collective action.

It is born politically when grievances become organizations, conventions, campaigns, newspapers, petitions, and legislative strategies. It is born as an identity when a name begins to connect causes that had previously been treated separately. Seneca Falls belongs to that story. So do Wollstonecraft, de Gouges, Condorcet, the British property and suffrage campaigns, Auclert's French feminism, Black abolitionist politics, working women's organization, and countless local campaigns that never became one famous founding moment. None is sufficient alone. Together they transform a set of arguments into a historical movement. And the movement already contains the disagreements that will later multiply. Is equality mainly a matter of removing legal barriers? Does freedom require economic independence? Are women seeking the same social roles as men, or recognition of different experiences? Should family roles be reformed, shared, protected, or abolished? Can a movement speak for "women" when women's lives differ by race, class, work, sexuality, nation, and family position?

The first victories did not answer those questions. They made them politically unavoidable. The next chapter follows what happened after the movement won enough legal and political ground for its internal differences to become impossible to contain under one feminism.

NOTES

- [1] Nicolas de Condorcet, “Sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cité,” 1790. Used for the universalist argument that sex cannot coherently exclude women from citizenship.
- [2] Olympe de Gouges, Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen, 1791. Used for the revolutionary French challenge to sex exclusion in a language of universal rights.
- [3] Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 1792; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Mary Wollstonecraft.” Used for the relationship between education, dependency, virtue, and claims of natural female incapacity.
- [4] Library of Congress, “Declaration of Sentiments,” Seneca Falls Convention, 1848. Used for the public program of grievances and the demand for woman suffrage.
- [5] U.S. National Park Service, Women’s Rights National Historical Park. Used for Seneca Falls organizers’ abolitionist backgrounds, reform skills, and Frederick Douglass’s participation.
- [6] U.S. National Park Service, “A Great Inheritance: Introduction.” Used for both the organizational influence of abolitionism and documented racism and exclusion inside abolitionist and early women’s-rights movements.
- [7] U.S. National Park Service, “Seneca Falls in 1848.” Used for the convention’s historical status as the first meeting organized specifically around women’s social, civil, religious condition and rights in the United States.
- [8] UK Parliament, “Marriage: property and children.” Used for the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882.
- [9] UK Parliament, historical materials on the Representation of the People Act 1918 and equal voting rights in 1928.
- [10] U.S. National Archives, “Suffrage” and “19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.” Used for the long federal amendment campaign, congressional passage in 1919, ratification in 1920, and the amendment’s prohibition of sex-based denial of voting rights.
- [11] U.S. National Archives, “Black Americans and the Vote.” Used for discriminatory laws and practices that continued to prevent many Black women and men from exercising formal voting rights.
- [12] U.S. National Archives, “15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Voting Rights (1870).” Used for the constitutional expansion of Black male voting rights and the later history of disenfranchisement.
- [13] Karen Offen, “Sur l’origine des mots ‘féminisme’ et ‘féministe,’” *Revue d’histoire moderne & contemporaine*, 1987. Used for the history of the French terms and Hubertine Auclert’s activist appropriation of feminist language.
- [14] Centre Hubertine Auclert, historical materials on Hubertine Auclert. Used for her suffrage activism, journalism, organization, and political use of the term feminist.

[15] Christine Bard, research on feminism under the French Third Republic. Used for organizations, strategic disputes, gradual reform, suffragism, and the formation of an identifiable French feminist movement.

[16] French National Assembly, historical materials on women's suffrage. Used for the April 21, 1944 ordinance and women's participation in elections in 1945.

[17] John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 1869, and Harriet Taylor Mill, "The Enfranchisement of Women," 1851. Used for liberal arguments for women's civil and political equality and for the presence of male allies in the history of the movement.

CHAPTER 3 — Feminisms: Equality, Liberation, and Divergence

Feminism becomes unmistakably plural when its early victories make its own object harder to define. As long as the central problem is an explicit legal disability—women cannot vote, control certain property, enter a profession, study in a particular institution—the demand can often be stated in a relatively simple way: extend to women rights already recognized as legitimate for men. But what happens when formal barriers begin to fall and differences remain? Is emancipation nearly complete once the law becomes neutral? Or were major institutions built around assumptions that continue to shape women's lives even after explicit exclusion disappears? Is the family an institution to democratize or a structure of domination? Is femininity an identity to free, a role to reject, a culture to value, or a category to abolish? Does equality mean entering existing institutions on equal terms, changing those institutions, or transforming the social categories that make “women” and “men” political groups in the first place?

These questions did not suddenly appear in the 1960s. Early feminists had already disagreed about equality, difference, family, work, suffrage, and strategy. After World War II, however, the disagreements changed scale. The question was no longer only: What rights are women denied? It became: What produces women's social position, and what would have to change for women to be genuinely free? That shift produced not one second-wave feminism but several overlapping and competing projects. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, occupies a major place in this transition. Her

importance is not exhausted by the famous claim that one is not born but becomes a woman. Beauvoir's broader project asks how a sexed human being is placed in a historical and social situation in which the masculine can appear neutral, universal, or primary while the feminine is constituted as the Other.[1]

She does not deny the body. She denies that biology writes a complete social destiny. Pregnancy, reproduction, physical difference, education, myth, law, work, and family institutions interact. A society then takes the resulting social position of women and treats it as though it were simply nature. That distinction matters because it avoids a false choice. One can acknowledge sexed bodies without accepting every social role built around them. One can seek equality without pretending men and women are physically identical. The central question is not whether difference exists. It is how a difference becomes a hierarchy, a limitation, or a prescribed life. Later feminisms would answer that question in incompatible ways.

In the United States, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, helped give public language to the dissatisfaction of many educated, predominantly white middle-class women living inside the postwar suburban housewife ideal.[2] Its force came from reframing private dissatisfaction as a social problem. A woman could possess education, material comfort, a family, and social approval and still experience a life organized almost entirely around marriage, motherhood, and domestic consumption as a form of confinement. The problem, in Friedan's account, was not that family life was inherently worthless. It was that women were told it should exhaust their identity. That argument helped catalyze a renewed mass feminism in the United States.

It also revealed the limits of speaking about “women” through one social location. Poor women, Black women, immigrant women, working-class women, and many others had never been excluded from paid labor by the luxury of suburban domesticity. For them, the problem could be exhausting work, low wages, racism, domestic labor after paid labor, or lack of choice over whether to work at all. What looked like imprisonment in the home for one group of women could look like inaccessible material security to another. Friedan therefore illustrates two truths at once. A socially narrow experience can still reveal a real form of constraint. And a feminism that mistakes that experience for womanhood in general will misdescribe many women’s lives.

That tension would become central to Black feminism, socialist feminism, labor feminism, and later intersectional analysis. One influential answer remained close to the earlier logic of equal rights. Liberal feminism focuses on women as autonomous individuals entitled to equal civil and political standing. Its central demands include nondiscrimination, equal access to education and employment, reproductive choice, political participation, and legal rules that treat sex-based exclusion as presumptively illegitimate.[3][4] This approach has obvious strengths. A hiring rule can be challenged. A professional exclusion can be repealed. A discriminatory law can be struck down. An institution can be required to explain why sex matters to a decision. Liberal feminism therefore translates many grievances into identifiable reforms.

Its difficulty appears when formal equality exists but social outcomes remain different. If men and women have the same legal right to a career but occupy different positions, what follows? Hidden discrimination may be present. So may

differences in family obligations, occupational choice, workplace design, socialization, geographic mobility, risk tolerance, hours, or preference. The liberal tradition contains different answers to these problems, but the general difficulty is unavoidable: equal rules do not automatically reveal why unequal distributions persist. That is where other feminisms argue that the law does not reach deeply enough. Radical feminism expanded the field of politics. The phrase “the personal is political,” associated with Carol Hanisch’s 1969 text published in 1970, captured a crucial shift.[5] Hanisch was responding to the charge that women discussing marriage, sexuality, frustration, family, or everyday life in consciousness-raising groups were doing therapy rather than politics.[19]

Her reply was that recurring “personal” problems might not be personal failures at all. If the same experiences appear across many lives, they may reflect shared institutions, norms, or power relations. That move changed the scale of feminist analysis. Housework, contraception, sexual expectations, fear, beauty, motherhood, violence, heterosexual relationships, and intimate dependency became legitimate political objects. The home could no longer be assumed to lie outside power merely because it was private. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, published in 1970, gave this expansion another influential vocabulary. She treated sexuality, culture, and literature as sites where relations of power between men and women could be reproduced.[6] *Politics*, in this sense, meant more than government. It included the ways one group’s norms could organize ordinary relationships and appear natural.

This widening of the political field exposed realities that a purely legal feminism could miss. A woman may have a formal right to leave a relationship and still be economically

dependent. She may have equal employment rights while performing most unpaid work at home. She may be legally free in sexual life while facing norms that distribute shame, initiative, fear, and reputation differently by sex. The radical insight is powerful: formal equality can coexist with structured dependency. Its risk is equally clear. The more patriarchy becomes a general explanation, the easier it becomes to fit radically different phenomena into the same causal story. Work, sex, violence, family, literature, psychology, and reproduction can all be interpreted as expressions of one system of male domination before the specific mechanism has been examined.

A concept that explains everything too quickly can stop distinguishing. That tension will matter throughout this book. Shulamith Firestone pushed radical analysis toward one of its furthest conclusions. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, also published in 1970, she treated reproductive asymmetry as a deep source of sex hierarchy and described women and men as sex classes within a revolutionary framework.[7] Her argument went far beyond equal law or equal employment. If women alone bear pregnancy and reproduction has historically created dependence, then liberation may require technological and social transformation of reproduction itself. Firestone matters not because her program represents feminism as a whole. It does not. She matters because she exposes a fundamental divide between two ideas of emancipation.

One seeks equal participation in common institutions. The other asks whether those institutions and even the social organization of reproduction are built on a division that equality inside the existing system cannot solve. This is not a disagreement about speed. It is a disagreement about what liberation means. Other feminist traditions put labor and material dependence at the

center. Marxist, socialist, and materialist feminisms are not one doctrine, but they share suspicion toward accounts that treat women's subordination as mainly a problem of attitudes or legal inequality.[4] Rights matter. So do resources, labor, property, care, and who benefits from work. A person can possess formal equality and still be dependent because her labor is unpaid, underpaid, or organized around someone else's needs.

The family therefore becomes an economic institution as well as an emotional one. Christine Delphy is central to the French materialist tradition. Her work on the domestic mode of production treats women's labor in the household as a material relation of exploitation rather than merely a cultural residue of sexism.[8] The shift is analytical. Instead of asking only why women are disadvantaged in the labor market, Delphy asks what is produced inside the household, who performs the labor, who receives its benefits, and why cooking, cleaning, child care, and support for another person's work are so easily classified as natural female activity rather than production. The framework is deliberately sharper than a general theory of "unequal sharing."

It treats domestic labor as a relation with economic structure. That strength also creates problems. If household labor is understood mainly as the exploitation of a class of women by a class of men, how should the theory handle households with different arrangements, same-sex couples, women with greater economic power than male partners, paid domestic workers who are often women themselves, or long-term changes in the division of domestic labor? Materialist theories have had to evolve because social reproduction is more complicated than a stable binary model of husband-exploiter and wife-exploited.

Broader theories of social reproduction respond by examining the work required to produce and sustain human life: child care, elder care, household maintenance, emotional support, health, education, and the everyday reproduction of workers and families.

Nancy Fraser later argued that capitalist societies depend on this work while frequently treating it as external to “the economy” and historically assigning much of it to women.[16] [17] This approach makes it possible to analyze gendered dependence without assuming that every man consciously extracts labor from every woman. The structure can matter even when no individual intends the structure. The French *Mouvement de libération des femmes*, or MLF, makes the plurality of feminism especially visible. It was not a single organization with one doctrine, one leadership, or one coherent program. Archives and historical accounts show a field of groups, actions, texts, theories, alliances, and conflicts.[9][18] The August 26, 1970 action at the Arc de Triomphe is often used as a symbolic public beginning, but groups existed before it, and doctrinal unity never followed.

The MLF was influenced by the American and international Women’s Liberation Movement. It was not simply its French branch. French political traditions, Marxism, psychoanalysis, materialist feminism, debates over sexual difference, and the relationship between autonomous women’s groups and the male-dominated Left all shaped its development. This matters for an American edition because translation can create a false equivalence. “Women’s Liberation” and “MLF” overlap historically. They are not interchangeable names for one movement. The differences become clearest in currents such as *Psychanalyse et Politique*, associated with Antoinette Fouque.

[10] That current linked unconscious life and politics, emphasized sexual difference, and criticized forms of universalism it believed erased female specificity. Fouque later stressed that *Psychanalyse et Politique* did not simply identify itself with feminism in the way an American reader might assume.[10]

The point is not to endorse that current. It is to preserve the fact that French women's liberation contained projects that do not fit neatly into an American map of liberal, radical, and socialist feminism. Feminism of difference begins with a problem worth taking seriously. If equality means only that women must succeed according to standards historically defined through male lives, emancipation can become assimilation. A woman may be "equal" only to the extent that she can organize her life like a man whose work is supported by someone else's care. From that perspective, valuing motherhood, care, female embodiment, or forms of female culture can look less like a return to tradition than a refusal to let male experience remain the invisible definition of the universal.

Difference no longer has to mean inferiority. It can become a claim to value. But the move carries a symmetrical danger. The more feminism assigns women distinctive moral, relational, maternal, peaceful, or creative qualities, the more it risks rebuilding—positively—the very essences earlier feminists challenged. A praised trait can become an obligation. To say that women possess a special relationship to care can recognize an undervalued experience. It can also make it easier to keep assigning care to women. Difference therefore creates a recurring feminist dilemma: how to recognize embodied and social experience without converting it into destiny. Monique Wittig pushed the critique in another direction. In *The Straight*

Mind and related work, Wittig argued that “woman” is not merely a neutral biological description but a political category produced inside a heterosexual social regime.[11][20]

Her famous claim that “lesbians are not women” is easily misunderstood if read biologically. The point was not that lesbians cease to have female bodies. It was that the social category “woman,” in her analysis, is constituted through an institutional relation to men, and political lesbianism represents an attempt to exit that relation. Wittig therefore does not simply demand equality between two stable sex classes. She questions the political stability of the classes themselves. This places her in a different relation to materialist feminism from approaches that treat women and men as enduring social classes whose conflict must be analyzed. It also helps explain her later influence on queer theory, even though her own framework should not be collapsed into every later theory of gender.

The political question becomes more radical: Does feminism seek freedom for women as a group, or the abolition of the social system that produces “women” and “men” as political classes? A movement cannot answer both questions in exactly the same way. In the United States, Black feminism exposed another problem with a feminism built around a universalized female experience. The Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977 argued from the lived intersection of racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression.[12] The Collective rejected the idea that Black women should choose between antiracist movements that marginalized sexism and feminist movements that marginalized racism and class. This was not yet “intersectionality” as a formal legal concept.

The distinction matters. Black feminists were analyzing intertwined structures before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the

term intersectionality in 1989. To rename all earlier Black feminist thought “intersectional feminism” would project a later vocabulary backward and erase the specific arguments those movements actually made. But the intellectual continuity is real. The Combahee statement attacks single-axis politics before that phrase became associated with Crenshaw’s legal analysis. bell hooks later criticized feminism that treated white, middle-class women’s experience as the unmarked experience of women as such.[13] *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* argued that a movement claiming broad liberation had to take race, class, domination, and differences among women seriously rather than add marginalized women after the main theory had already been built.

This criticism does not imply that sex stops mattering. It implies that sex cannot explain every woman’s position by itself. For an American reader, this is not an optional diversity footnote. Race has been structurally bound to citizenship, work, family, housing, violence, education, and political participation throughout U.S. history. A feminism that treated sex while ignoring those institutions would not merely be incomplete in the abstract. It would misdescribe American women. Kimberlé Crenshaw gave a precise name to one version of this problem. In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” published in 1989, she criticized legal and political reasoning that treated discrimination as though race and sex could be analyzed only on separate axes.[14]

A Black woman could encounter a form of exclusion not captured by looking only at “women” as though the reference woman were white, or only at “Black people” as though the reference person were male. Intersectionality began, in this formulation, as a critique of analytical structure. That origin

matters because the term is now used much more broadly. It can refer to identity, coalition, multiple forms of disadvantage, social position, or a general theory of power. Some of those extensions may be productive. But they are not identical to Crenshaw's original legal problem. The core insight is narrower and stronger: Categories can interact in ways that make a single-axis model systematically miss people.

That does not mean every social difference must be explained by an ever-growing list of identities. It means the chosen categories must fit the mechanism being studied. By the late twentieth century, another question had moved to the center. Who is the subject of feminism? Earlier feminisms could disagree about the causes of women's oppression while still assuming that "women" named the political group requiring emancipation. Poststructuralist and queer-influenced theories placed that assumption under pressure. Judith Butler's work became particularly influential in questioning the idea that gender is a stable social layer built on an entirely self-evident natural sex.[15] The argument is more complex than the slogan that "gender is performed." Butler's theory of performativity examines how repeated social practices, norms, language, and institutions help produce the intelligibility of gendered subjects.

The effect on feminist politics is destabilizing. If the category "women" is itself historically produced, feminism cannot treat that category as politically innocent. But the alternative creates its own difficulty. A movement needs some way to name the people affected by sex-based reproductive constraints, discrimination, violence, or exclusion. Statistics require categories. Law requires definitions. Medicine may need sexed information. Political coalitions need some account of who is represented. The problem therefore cannot be solved by simply

declaring categories unreal. Categories can be socially produced and still have material consequences. This tension now runs through contemporary disputes over sex, gender identity, embodiment, statistics, and the boundaries of feminist politics. There is no single feminist settlement.

That lack of consensus is itself part of the history. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, feminism had also entered institutions. Equality law, workplace regulation, university programs, public agencies, professional standards, political parties, unions, and large organizations increasingly adopted parts of feminist vocabulary and policy. Institutionalization is a form of success. It is also a transformation. A radical critique can become a compliance rule. A demand for liberation can become a training module, a reporting system, or an equality indicator. An institution is generally better at administering a defined category than at sustaining an open-ended critique of the system that created the category. Nancy Fraser's retrospective analysis of second-wave feminism captures part of this ambivalence.[16]

She credits second-wave feminism with expanding justice beyond economic distribution to include status hierarchy, culture, family, and political voice. But she also argues that themes such as individual autonomy, flexibility, and the critique of the male breadwinner could be selectively absorbed into a neoliberal economy that celebrates the independent worker while weakening social support for care. Her later analysis of capital and care develops the problem further.[17] A two-earner household may reduce women's economic dependence. It can also create a care crisis if paid work expands without adequate time, public provision, or redistribution of domestic responsibility. This is not an argument for restoring the male

breadwinner family. It is an argument that liberation from one dependency can expose another institutional problem.

Feminism can win one argument and still face a new one created partly by the conditions of victory. By this point, “feminism” names a field of competing answers. Liberal feminism emphasizes equal rights, autonomy, opportunity, and fair access to institutions. Radical feminism argues that power reaches into sexuality, intimacy, family, and culture in ways the law alone cannot solve. Materialist, Marxist, and socialist feminisms emphasize labor, resources, exploitation, social reproduction, and economic structure. Feminisms of difference resist the assumption that equality requires assimilation to male norms. Black feminism insists that race, class, sex, and other structures can interact and that white middle-class women cannot stand in for women as a whole.

Intersectional analysis challenges single-axis models. Wittig and queer or poststructuralist traditions question whether the political categories themselves should be treated as fixed. These positions sometimes complement one another. Sometimes they do not. A theory that values sexual difference can conflict directly with one that seeks to abolish sex classes. A feminism centered on equal access to institutions can conflict with one that treats the institutions themselves as structurally male. An approach that emphasizes individual choice can conflict with one that sees preferences as shaped by domination. A theory that treats “women” as a necessary political class can conflict with one that treats the category as part of the structure to be dismantled.

Those are not superficial disagreements inside one doctrine. They are rival accounts of what freedom requires. That is why the language of “waves” can be useful as chronology and

misleading as theory. It encourages the image of one movement moving through successive stages, as though later feminisms simply corrected earlier ones and the history culminated in a more advanced synthesis. The reality is messier. Older arguments survive. New problems reopen old disputes. A legal reform can strengthen liberal feminism while generating a radical critique of the institution it reforms. A critique of white feminism can deepen the movement without resolving conflicts over class, sexuality, religion, reproduction, or sex itself. A movement can become more inclusive and more internally divided at the same time.

The most useful way to compare feminisms is therefore not to rank them. It is to ask what mechanism each one makes visible and what it risks turning into background. Liberal feminism is strong at identifying unequal rules, discriminatory barriers, and failures of individual autonomy. It can understate how formally neutral institutions reproduce dependency through family, culture, or unequal resources. Radical feminism is strong at making power visible inside private life, sexuality, violence, and cultural norms. It can become too totalizing when patriarchy explains every difference before specific causes are tested. Materialist and socialist feminisms illuminate unpaid labor, care, economic dependence, and the organization of social reproduction. They can flatten differences among households or treat class-like relations between the sexes as more stable than they are.

Feminisms of difference can expose the way male experience masquerades as the universal norm. They can also turn historically produced female roles into valued essences and thereby rebuild obligation through praise. Black feminism and intersectional analysis reveal how a universal female subject

can erase women whose lives are structured simultaneously by race, class, sexuality, disability, immigration status, or other institutions. Their concepts become weaker when every identity difference is treated as equally explanatory regardless of mechanism. Poststructuralist and queer approaches reveal that categories are politically produced rather than neutral containers. They can create practical difficulties when institutions need stable categories for measurement, medicine, law, or targeted protection. None of these limits makes the corresponding feminism worthless.

They reveal why feminism became plural. The movement learned that formal equality was not enough to explain women's lives. It then discovered that there was no single uncontested theory of what lay beyond formal equality. That is the intellectual inheritance carried into the next chapter. Feminism transformed law and social expectations precisely because it developed many ways of identifying constraint. Its success also brought those competing theories into institutions, policies, and conflicts where they could no longer remain abstract. The next question is therefore empirical and political: What did feminist movements actually change—and which disputes remained unresolved even after the law, the workplace, the family, sexuality, and public institutions began to change with them?

NOTES

[1] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Simone de Beauvoir." Used for Beauvoir's account of woman as Other, situation, embodiment, and the critique of biological destiny.

[2] National Women's History Museum, "Feminism: The Second Wave." Used for The Feminine Mystique, its role in postwar U.S. feminism, and the social specificity of the suburban white middle-class experience it described.

- [3] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Liberal Feminism." Used for liberal feminism's emphasis on autonomy, equal rights, access, and the legitimacy of institutions under conditions of equality.
- [4] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Feminist Political Philosophy." Used for distinctions among liberal, radical, Marxist/socialist, and other feminist political traditions.
- [5] Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political." Used for consciousness-raising and the argument that recurring personal problems can have political causes.
- [6] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970. Used for the radical-feminist expansion of politics into sexuality, culture, and everyday power.
- [7] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 1970. Used for the sex-class analysis of reproduction and the proposal for radical transformation of reproductive relations.
- [8] Christine Delphy, *The Main Enemy* and work on the domestic mode of production. Used for French materialist feminism, domestic labor, and exploitation in the family.
- [9] INA and BnF/CCFr archives of the Mouvement de libération des femmes. Used for the MLF's public emergence around 1970 and its organizational and theoretical plurality.
- [10] Antoinette Fouque, "Psychanalyse et politique." Used as a primary self-description of *Psychanalyse et Politique*, its emphasis on sexual difference, and its distance from the label feminism.
- [11] Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind*; Library of Congress materials on Wittig. Used for heterosexuality as a political regime and the critique of "women" as a political class.
- [12] Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977. Used for the simultaneous analysis of racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and for the critique of both white feminism and sexism in antiracist politics.
- [13] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 1984. Used for the critique of white bourgeois experience as the implicit center of feminism and the demand for a broader mass feminist politics.
- [14] Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 1989. Used for the critique of single-axis legal and political analysis and the academic formulation of intersectionality.
- [15] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Feminist Perspectives on the Body" and "Feminist Perspectives on Power." Used for Butler, performativity, queer/poststructuralist challenges to stable sex/gender categories, and debates over the feminist subject.
- [16] Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," 2009. Used for the retrospective analysis of second-wave feminism and the possible neoliberal appropriation of some feminist themes.
- [17] Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," 2016. Used for social reproduction, care, and the tension between paid labor and the institutions that sustain human life.

[18] BnF/CCFr, Fonds Mouvement de libération des femmes, 1970–1976. Used as archival evidence of the MLF’s plurality of groups, texts, actions, and internal disputes.

[19] Redstockings Women’s Liberation Archives, consciousness-raising materials 1968–1972. Used for the American radical-feminist context of consciousness-raising and internal debates

[20] Library of Congress, “Monique Wittig — French Women & Feminists in History.” Used for Wittig’s historical position in French feminism and political lesbianism..

CHAPTER 4 — What Feminism Changed—and What It Still Fights Over

Measuring what feminism changed is harder than listing laws passed after 1960 and calling them feminist victories. That story is tempting because many of the changes are real: married women gained stronger independent legal standing, contraception became easier to obtain, abortion became a constitutional right for a time and then lost that status, sex discrimination at work became unlawful under major federal statutes, sexual harassment became a recognized form of employment discrimination, and violence once treated as private became an explicit object of public policy. Yet chronology is not causation. Feminist movements were sometimes direct political actors in these changes. At other times they supplied a language, made a hidden cost visible, or pushed institutions to treat an old practice as a public problem. Economic change, medical technology, civil-rights litigation, courts, legislatures, unions, demographic shifts, and changes in family life mattered too.

That distinction is not a way of minimizing feminism. It is a way of taking its historical role seriously enough to describe it accurately. Industrialization did not wait for feminism. The birth-control pill was not invented by a social movement. Women's entry into higher education and paid employment was shaped by economic demand as well as politics. But a social possibility is not the same thing as a freedom. A woman may earn money without controlling it, attend school without having equal access to a profession, obtain contraception without being able to afford or safely use it, or enter a workplace whose formal rules are equal while its practices remain

discriminatory. Feminist politics repeatedly worked in the gap between what had become possible and what had become legitimate.

The American case makes this especially important because there is no single legal timeline that can simply replace the French one. Family law, property law, divorce, and many questions of personal status developed through state law, while other transformations came through federal statutes or constitutional decisions. An American edition therefore has to resist the urge to invent one national turning point. The relevant story is a layered one: state reforms, federal civil-rights law, constitutional doctrine, changes in labor markets and family behavior, and movements that fought over what equality should mean.

In France, the Napoleonic Code offers a relatively clear historical symbol of marital hierarchy because one national legal system explicitly assigned different powers and duties to husband and wife. The United States followed a more fragmented path. The legal position of married women varied by state, and reforms arrived at different times and in different forms.[1] That variation matters. It prevents us from saying that “American women gained property rights in year X” as if the country had enacted one national emancipation statute.

New York’s Married Women’s Property Act of 1848 is useful precisely because it is a concrete state example rather than a fictional national equivalent. The law allowed a married woman to own certain property separately from her husband; the National Park Service notes that this legal change later enabled Frances Seward to own land in her own name.[2] Similar reforms spread and evolved elsewhere, but they did not erase every legal asymmetry at once. Property, contracts, earnings,

custody, divorce, and professional access were distinct problems, often governed by different rules.

The larger transformation was therefore not one statute but a change in the standard by which family law could be justified. An order in which marriage automatically absorbed part of a woman's independent legal standing became harder to defend as liberal societies increasingly treated adulthood as a status of individual legal agency. Feminist arguments were not the only force behind this transition, but they sharpened its contradiction: if women were citizens and legal persons, why should marriage reduce the autonomy they possessed outside it?

That shift also changed the position of men. Removing legal privileges from husbands does not make husbands an oppressed class. It does, however, alter what the role of husband means. A legal order built around male representation of the family assigns men both authority and responsibility. When authority becomes shared or individualized, the old role loses part of its institutional function. Equality changes both positions in a relationship even when the reform is aimed at correcting the subordination of one. This is a recurring pattern. Feminism often changed more than women's access to a particular right. By contesting the assumption that sex itself could determine legal capacity, it made sex-based roles require justification. That principle would later reach employment, reproduction, parenting, and sexual autonomy.

Reproductive freedom shows even more clearly why law, material access, and social legitimacy must be separated. The American constitutional story of contraception did not begin with a federal statute comparable to France's 1967 Neuwirth law. In *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965, the Supreme Court struck down a Connecticut law that criminalized the furnishing

of birth control to married couples, grounding its decision in constitutional privacy.[3] Seven years later, *Eisenstadt v. Baird* invalidated a Massachusetts restriction that treated unmarried people differently in access to contraception.[4] The doctrinal routes were not identical, but the combined effect was significant: the ability to control reproduction could no longer be treated simply as a privilege attached to marriage.

That legal change was not produced by feminism alone. It grew from litigation, medical change, a broader constitutional privacy doctrine, and a society already undergoing major changes in sexuality and family life. Yet feminist and reproductive-rights movements gave the issue a wider political meaning. Contraception was not only a technology for reducing pregnancy risk. It became part of a claim about who should control the timing and consequences of reproduction. The distinction matters because legal permission is only one layer of freedom. A method may be lawful but unavailable nearby, medically unsuitable, expensive, stigmatized, or difficult to obtain confidentially. Conversely, widespread use can precede a stable political consensus about the values the practice represents. A right on paper, a practical capability, and a social norm are different things.

Abortion made that instability impossible to ignore. In *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, the Supreme Court held that constitutional privacy protected a woman's decision whether to terminate a pregnancy, subject to the framework the Court created. *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* later retained a constitutional protection while replacing *Roe's* framework with an "undue burden" standard. In 2022, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overruled both *Roe* and *Casey* and held that the federal Constitution does not confer a right to abortion.[5] The

legal landscape that followed is therefore not one uniform American rule. Regulation depends heavily on political decisions and state law, alongside whatever federal rules apply to particular questions.

For a book about feminism, the significance is larger than the fate of one judicial doctrine. Abortion demonstrates that what a movement calls a “conquest” may remain reversible. It also shows how different political systems can move in opposite directions. France, for example, amended its Constitution in 2024 to guarantee a woman’s freedom to obtain an abortion under conditions set by law.[21] The contrast is analytically useful because it prevents a national trajectory from masquerading as a universal stage of social development.

The underlying conflict is not exhausted by the language of rights. Reproductive autonomy can mean freedom not to continue a pregnancy, but it can also include the practical ability to choose parenthood without catastrophic economic dependence. Child care, health coverage, income, workplace rules, and the distribution of care all shape what choices are realistically available. A feminism concerned only with formal permission can miss the conditions that make a choice usable. A feminism concerned only with material conditions can, in turn, lose sight of the individual right to refuse a pregnancy or a prescribed family role. The tension between formal liberty and substantive capacity will return throughout this book. Employment is where the difference between legal equality and observed outcomes becomes especially visible.

The Equal Pay Act of 1963 prohibits sex-based wage discrimination between men and women in the same establishment when they perform jobs requiring substantially equal skill, effort, and responsibility under similar working

conditions, subject to the statute's recognized exceptions.[6] Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 separately prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of sex, among other protected characteristics.[7] Those laws mark a profound shift in the legal standard. An employer cannot legitimately defend a lower wage or an exclusion simply by saying that men and women occupy different social roles. But equal legal rules do not generate identical economic distributions. In the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2025 annual earnings data—an eleven-month average because October data were not collected during the federal shutdown—women working full time in wage and salary jobs had median usual weekly earnings of \$1,089, compared with \$1,326 for men—82.1 percent as much.[8]

The number is real, but its meaning is often abused. It is not a measure of what a woman is paid for doing the same job as a man. It is a comparison of medians across broad populations of full-time wage and salary workers. Occupation, industry, age, hours, tenure, geography, job level, and family patterns can all affect the distribution. Direct discrimination can also affect earnings. The aggregate gap alone cannot tell us how much each mechanism contributes. That is not a reason to dismiss the gap. It is a reason to ask better questions.

A large difference can be a signal that deserves investigation without being a causal explanation in itself. If women and men cluster in different occupations, we need to know why. If promotion rates differ, we need to ask what happens inside firms. If parenthood affects careers differently, we need to distinguish biological constraints, leave policy, child-care costs, employer expectations, household bargaining, and preferences. If women enter high-paying fields but remain less represented at the top, the mechanisms may not be the same as those that

produce differences across occupations. The feminist contribution here was not merely to demand one number reach zero. It was to make previously naturalized differences examinable. Why should a “women’s job” pay less? Why should marriage or motherhood justify exclusion? Why should a man’s income be treated as the family’s real wage while a woman’s is supplementary? Once those assumptions lose legitimacy, differences require explanation rather than deference.

The same standard must then be applied to feminist explanations. Calling every average gap “the patriarchy” does not identify a mechanism. A serious equality politics has to be capable of finding discrimination where it exists and rejecting a discrimination claim where the evidence points elsewhere. Otherwise the concept becomes unfalsifiable. Paid employment changed women’s economic position, but it did not make unpaid work disappear. The American Time Use Survey gives a useful snapshot. In 2025, women age fifteen and older spent an average of 2.38 hours per day on household activities across the population, compared with 1.58 hours for men. Women were also more likely to perform household activities on an average day: 86.7 percent compared with 74.9 percent of men.[9] Those categories include tasks such as housework, cooking, lawn care, and household management; they are not a pure measure of child care, emotional labor, or “who works harder.”

The long-run direction is also more complicated than a static inequality story. BLS data show changes in some tasks between 2003 and 2014: the share of men doing food preparation and cleanup on an average day rose from 35 to 43 percent, while the share of women doing housework declined from 54 to 49 percent and the average time women spent on housework fell from 58 to 49 minutes.[10] These are partial indicators, not a

complete history of domestic equality. Still, they show that household behavior can change without becoming symmetrical.

Feminism clearly helped make unpaid domestic labor visible as labor. Once cooking, cleaning, child care, and household coordination are treated as activities with time costs rather than as natural expressions of femininity, the internal economy of a household becomes open to political and moral scrutiny. But visibility does not tell us how much of a measured difference is caused by ideology, employment schedules, income, number and age of children, preferences, housing, outsourcing, or bargaining between partners.

The word “choice” does not settle the matter either. A choice can be genuine and still be shaped by unequal options. A parent may reduce paid work because child care costs exceed the return from staying full time. A couple may specialize because one partner earns much more. Cultural expectations can influence who feels responsible for noticing a task before anyone explicitly negotiates it. At the same time, not every unequal division of labor is proof of coercion. Adults can prefer different arrangements. The useful feminist move was to make the arrangement discussable. The next step is empirical: identify which constraints are operating, who bears the costs, whether the arrangement is revisable, and whether each person has a realistic ability to leave or renegotiate the role.

Political representation poses a related problem. The United States did not follow the French route of constitutional and statutory parity rules for elected office. American women entered national political institutions through a different legal and electoral structure. Jeannette Rankin of Montana was elected in 1916 and became the first woman to serve in Congress in 1917, before ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.[11]

Women's representation grew over the following century, but formal eligibility and numerical representation have never been the same thing. That gap supports at least two different interpretations. One view emphasizes formal neutrality. If women and men may run under the same rules, sex should not become a criterion for allocating offices. Another view argues that persistent underrepresentation can reveal barriers that formally neutral rules do not capture: recruitment networks, fundraising, incumbency, caregiving constraints, party selection, harassment, voter expectations, or the unequal distribution of political ambition and opportunity.

The French debate over parity cannot simply be imported to answer this American question. The institutional mechanisms are different. What can be transferred is the underlying distinction: equal access in law is not the same concept as equal representation in outcome. A numerical imbalance is therefore neither irrelevant nor self-interpreting. It may justify investigation. It does not, by itself, prove a single cause. The same evidentiary discipline that applies to pay should apply to politics. One of feminism's most durable effects was to challenge the idea that private settings were outside the reach of justice.

Sexual harassment is a clear American example. Title VII did not originally arrive with a complete legal doctrine of workplace sexual harassment already attached. Courts and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission developed that doctrine over time. In *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* in 1986, the Supreme Court recognized for the first time that sexual harassment can violate Title VII.^[12] The legal shift matters because it changes the category of the harm. Conduct that might once have been dismissed as office culture, flirtation, or a personal dispute can, under defined conditions, become

unlawful discrimination. This is exactly the kind of transformation feminist politics often produces at its strongest: not the invention of a new injury, but a change in what institutions are willing to name.

Domestic and sexual violence followed a similarly important path into federal policy. Congress enacted the first Violence Against Women Act in 1994; later reauthorizations came in 2000, 2005, 2013, and 2022. The Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women, created in 1995, administers federal grant programs addressing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.[13] Marital rape shows the same shift at the state level. For much of American legal history, marriage could shield forced sex from ordinary rape law. Reform came unevenly. Federal justice research notes that marital rape had become a crime in all fifty states by 1993, while important spousal exemptions and distinctions still remained in many jurisdictions afterward.[22] The historical change is therefore real without being clean or instantaneous: marriage gradually ceased to function as blanket consent, but state laws did not all reach the same rule at the same time.

None of this means that feminist activism alone wrote federal law, or that every policy adopted under the banner of protecting women is beyond criticism. Legislation is produced by coalitions, institutions, elections, professional expertise, victim advocacy, law enforcement, and political compromise. But it is difficult to understand the transformation without the long feminist insistence that violence in intimate life is not merely a family matter and that sexual coercion is not made harmless by familiarity, romance, or marriage. The legal recognition of harm creates a second problem: line-drawing. Not every unpleasant sexual interaction is unlawful harassment. Not every accusation

is proved. A system can take victims seriously without treating an allegation as a verdict. It can recognize that power differences affect behavior without abandoning standards of evidence. It can broaden protection without making criminal or employment rules so vague that ordinary conflict becomes legally indistinguishable from coercion.

This tension is not an argument for returning to silence. It is a consequence of success. Once a society agrees that a category of conduct matters, it has to define the category well enough to act on it. The #MeToo wave that went viral in 2017 accelerated this change in public visibility. Its clearest effect was not a new theory of sex relations. It was scale. Experiences of harassment, coercion, retaliation, and abuse of professional power that had often been handled privately appeared in public at extraordinary volume. Institutions that already had formal policies faced new pressure to ask whether those policies worked in practice.

There is at least one measurable institutional signal. The EEOC received 6,696 sexual-harassment charges in fiscal year 2017, 7,609 in 2018, and 7,514 in 2019. The agency itself notes the increase in the two years after #MeToo went viral in October 2017.[14] That pattern does not tell us whether underlying harassment increased or decreased, and it cannot measure the total prevalence of harassment because much of it is never formally reported. It shows something narrower: more sexual-harassment charges reached the federal enforcement system immediately after the movement's public explosion. That distinction matters. A social movement may change reporting before it changes behavior. It may change what people recognize as misconduct before institutions learn how to respond. It may also create new risks: public accusation can

move faster than investigation; online attention can reward the most dramatic interpretation; employers can respond defensively rather than fairly.

The proper lesson is not that testimony should be distrusted. It is that recognition and adjudication perform different functions. Listening is part of discovering a problem. Evidence is part of deciding what happened in a specific case. A mature response needs both. The more feminism changed institutions, the more its disagreements moved away from obvious legal incapacities and toward conflicts among competing values. This is not proof that the movement ran out of real problems. It is what happens when a political tradition expands. Questions once treated as external become internal: How much protection is compatible with autonomy? When does a sexual market become exploitation? Does sex remain the central political category, or must feminism reorganize itself around gender identity? Should universal rules ignore cultural difference, or can “universalism” conceal the perspective of a dominant group?

Sex work is one example. Some feminist traditions treat prostitution as an institution built on gendered economic and sexual inequality and therefore see reducing demand as part of liberation. Other feminists, sex-worker organizations, and sex-positive or liberal approaches emphasize adult agency, labor rights, health, and the danger that criminalization can push people into greater precarity. France’s 2016 law, which penalized the purchase of sexual services while creating support measures for people leaving prostitution, represents one particular abolitionist policy choice.[15] It is useful in an American edition precisely as a foreign case, not as something to be translated into a nonexistent national U.S. equivalent.

The disagreement reveals a genuine philosophical conflict. If consent occurs under economic constraint, when is it sufficiently free to deserve legal respect? If the state prohibits a transaction in order to protect a vulnerable class, when does protection become paternalism? Feminists can begin from a common concern for women's autonomy and still reach opposite policy conclusions because they disagree about the conditions under which autonomy is real. The French controversy over the Islamic veil makes the same point from another direction. French debates since the late twentieth century have forced feminists to weigh sexual equality, secularism, religious freedom, racism, and women's own accounts of their choices.[16] The institutional background is specifically French; *laïcité* cannot be replaced with a supposed American equivalent without changing the problem. But the conflict travels. One side worries that a choice may reproduce a sex-specific norm that limits women. Another worries that a state or movement claiming to liberate women can reproduce domination by telling them which clothing is compatible with emancipation.

Neither problem disappears by repeating the word "choice." Choices happen inside norms and constraints. But neither can choice be dismissed whenever an outside observer believes the surrounding norm is oppressive. The difficult work lies in identifying coercion without treating adults as incapable of interpreting their own lives. The debate over sex and gender reaches even deeper because it concerns the political subject of feminism itself. Some feminist approaches insist that sex remains indispensable for understanding reproduction, violence, medicine, statistical inequality, and historical discrimination. Other approaches place greater emphasis on gender identity, social transition, and the harms that can follow

when institutions recognize only a rigid binary based on sex assigned at birth. Feminist philosophy contains no single settled answer to every conflict produced by these commitments.[17] [18]

An American edition should not pretend otherwise. It also should not turn the chapter into a referendum on contemporary culture-war slogans. The function here is narrower: a movement originally organized around the emancipation of women now contains real disagreement about how “women,” “sex,” and “gender” should be defined across different contexts. Statistics, medical care, anti-discrimination law, identity, and political coalition-building do not always require the same categories. Treating them as if they did creates confusion before the substantive debate even begins. A successful movement eventually encounters an odd problem: some of its language stops sounding radical because institutions begin using it. Sex discrimination is now an ordinary category of employment law. Sexual harassment can trigger formal compliance systems. Federal programs address domestic and sexual violence. Universities, corporations, unions, courts, and government agencies collect data, issue guidance, and create procedures around problems that earlier generations of feminists struggled simply to make visible.

That is a real form of institutional success. A person confronting discrimination no longer has to invent the category from scratch before making a claim. Institutionalization also changes the movement. Bureaucracies prefer problems they can define, count, regulate, and audit. A radical critique of power can become a training module. A demand for transformation can become a reporting requirement. A conflict over social roles can become a compliance question. None of these translations is

necessarily bad. Procedures can protect people more reliably than slogans. But administrative recognition can narrow a political idea to the portion an institution knows how to manage.

Nancy Fraser has argued that second-wave feminism widened the meaning of justice by challenging economic inequality, status hierarchy, and political exclusion at the same time. She has also warned that some feminist themes—especially autonomy and the critique of the male breadwinner family—could be absorbed into a form of capitalism that celebrates flexible workers while leaving care insufficiently supported.[19] Her later work develops this as a contradiction between economies that depend on social reproduction and pressures that can weaken the time and resources available for it.[20] The point is not that women entering paid employment was a mistake. Economic independence can be one of the strongest protections against domination inside a household. The point is that a gain changes meaning depending on the system around it.

In a household where one man controls the income, women's access to paid work can radically expand freedom. In a household where two full-time incomes are necessary but care remains expensive and unevenly distributed, universal labor-force participation can create a different strain. The answer is not to restore women's dependence. It is to notice that emancipation from one structure does not automatically solve the work that structure had organized. This is where the data on household labor matter. Women doing more unpaid household work on average does not prove a single theory of exploitation. But neither can it be treated as irrelevant once paid employment becomes the norm. The right analytical question is how paid work, care, income, family structure, public policy,

and preferences interact—and who has realistic room to renegotiate the arrangement.

By this point, feminism's twentieth- and twenty-first-century legacy can be separated into three parts. The first is legal and institutional. Rules that once openly limited women's property, employment, or personal autonomy became difficult or impossible to defend under modern equality norms. Federal employment law prohibits sex discrimination. Sexual harassment can be unlawful discrimination. Domestic and sexual violence are explicit subjects of public policy. Reproductive law has changed profoundly, although abortion demonstrates that legal change can be reversed and redistributed across jurisdictions rather than moving in one direction forever. These changes were not produced by feminism alone. But they overlap closely with central feminist claims, and feminist organizing was often part of the political environment that made them possible.

The second legacy is cultural. Experiences once described as private, natural, trivial, or simply the price of being a woman became available for comparison and public argument. Unpaid work can be measured. Sexual harassment can be named. Expectations about beauty, parenting, employment, and sexual behavior can be analyzed as social norms rather than accepted as biological fate. This is harder to quantify than the passage of a statute, but it may be one of feminism's most durable achievements. The third legacy is conflict.

Once explicit legal exclusions recede, disagreement increasingly concerns what equality requires in situations where values collide. Should the state treat sex as irrelevant, or sometimes notice sex in order to correct a patterned disadvantage? When does protection become paternalism? When does recognition of

identity make statistical or biological categories harder to use? When does a market transaction express autonomy, and when does it reproduce coercion? What should law do about behavior that is harmful but not criminal? These are not fake questions invented to keep a movement alive. They are the kinds of questions political success creates. A movement that changes institutions eventually reaches domains where there is no single obvious prohibition to repeal.

That makes two opposite verdicts equally inadequate. The first says feminism won its essential battles and now survives mainly by manufacturing grievances. That ignores ongoing discrimination, violence, economic constraints, and the fact that formal rights do not automatically produce equal capabilities. The second says any remaining difference between women and men proves that male domination is fundamentally unchanged. That ignores the scale of legal, economic, and cultural transformation and treats every outcome gap as if it already contained its own causal explanation. A more serious conclusion is less dramatic. Feminism transformed American society in ways that can be documented. It did not erase every difference between the sexes. It did not produce one theory capable of explaining all remaining differences. Some of its claims became widely institutionalized; others remain fiercely disputed even within feminism. And some contemporary differences cannot be understood without variables—economic, familial, biological, psychological, or cultural—that are not reducible to male power alone.

This conclusion leads directly to the next part of the book. When women's legal and economic roles change, men do not remain in an untouched social position. A system of sex roles is relational. If a wife no longer requires a husband's legal

authority, husbandhood loses an old institutional power. If a woman can support herself, male provision becomes less necessary as a condition of her survival. If parental authority is understood as belonging to both parents, fatherhood is pushed toward a more relational model rather than a primarily representative or economic one. If women enter professions once identified with male status, occupational success no longer guarantees a man a superior position within a couple.

Many of these changes can liberate men too. A man may gain more room to become a caregiver, to depend economically on a partner for a period, to reject a breadwinner identity, or to build a family relationship less organized around command and provision. But social expectations do not always change at the same speed. A society can tell women that economic dependence is undesirable while continuing to judge men heavily by earning power. It can encourage fathers to be more emotionally present while workplaces still punish time away from paid employment. It can reject male authority without developing an equally clear account of what obligations remain attached to masculinity. These mismatches do not prove that feminism “oppresses men.” They do create questions that a theory focused only on women can fail to notice.

That is where the history of men’s movements begins. Some men would interpret the transformation of gender roles as an invitation to join feminist efforts and free themselves from rigid masculinity. Others would organize around fatherhood, emotional life, health, work, or the costs of the breadwinner role. Still others would conclude that feminism had not merely changed an unequal system but had become an adversary of men. Those paths must not be collapsed into one movement.

Understanding the difference between them is the task of the next chapter.

NOTES

[1] Law Library of Congress, “State Law Resources — American Women.” The resource organizes historical legal materials by state and is used here to establish the nonuniform character of U.S. law affecting women’s property, family status, employment, and related rights.

[2] U.S. National Park Service, “William H. Seward.” Used for the New York Married Women’s Property Act of 1848 and the concrete example of Frances Seward’s separate ownership of land.

[3] Constitution Annotated, discussion of *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965), including the Court’s invalidation of Connecticut’s prohibition on furnishing birth control to married couples.

[4] Constitution Annotated, “Table of Laws Held Unconstitutional,” entry for *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 405 U.S. 438 (1972), concerning Massachusetts restrictions on distribution of contraceptives to unmarried persons.

[5] Constitution Annotated, “Abortion, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, and Post-*Dobbs* Doctrine.” Used for *Roe*, *Casey*, *Dobbs*, and the current constitutional status of abortion regulation.

[6] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “Equal Pay Act of 1963.” Used for the statute’s substantially-equal-work standard and recognized exceptions.

[7] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “The Commission” / laws enforced by EEOC. Used for Title VII’s prohibition of employment discrimination on the basis of sex and other protected characteristics.

[8] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers — 2025.” Used for 2025 median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers and the methodological note that annual 2025 estimates use eleven months because October data were not collected during the federal shutdown.

[9] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “American Time Use Survey — 2025.” Used for household-activity participation and average time by sex.

[10] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “American Time Use Survey — 2014 Results.” Used for the 2003–2014 changes in food preparation/cleanup by men and housework participation/time by women.

[11] U.S. House of Representatives, History, Art & Archives, “Women in Congress” and biography of Jeannette Rankin. Used for Rankin’s election in 1916 and service beginning in 1917 and for the historical trajectory of women’s representation in Congress.

[12] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “Selected Supreme Court Decisions 1971–1999.” Used for *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* (1986) as the first Supreme Court recognition that sexual harassment can violate Title VII.

[13] U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, “History.” Used for enactment of VAWA in 1994, creation of OVW in 1995, and subsequent reauthorizations.

[14] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “Sexual Harassment in Our Nation’s Workplaces.” Used for sexual-harassment charge receipts in FY2017–FY2019 and the agency’s caution that formal charges do not capture all harassment.

[15] French Ministry of Justice, evaluation/materials concerning the French law of April 13, 2016 on the prostitution system. Used only as an explicitly French comparative policy example.

[16] Natacha Chetcuti, “Genre, laïcité et féminisme en France : nouvelles redéfinitions de la citoyenneté ?” Used to document the specifically French feminist conflict around secularism, religion, sex equality, and autonomy.

[17] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Feminist Political Philosophy.” Used for the plural character of feminist political traditions and their competing accounts of autonomy, equality, sexuality, and power.

[18] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender.” Used for the continuing philosophical disputes over sex, gender, and the category “women.”

[19] Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review*, 2009. Used for the argument that feminist critiques of status hierarchy and the male-breadwinner model can interact ambivalently with transformations in capitalism.

[20] Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review*, 2016. Used for the tension between economies dependent on social reproduction and pressures that can undermine care.

[21] Légifrance, Constitutional Law No. 2024-200 of March 8, 2024, amending Article 34 of the French Constitution to guarantee the freedom of a woman to have recourse to a voluntary termination of pregnancy under conditions determined by law.

[22] Office of Justice Programs, “Marital Rape: New Research and Directions” (2006). Used for the historical statement that marital rape had become a crime in all fifty states by 1993 while significant spousal exemptions or distinctions persisted afterward.

CHAPTER 5 — Men in Question: From Men's Liberation to Men's Movements

When women's roles began to be challenged publicly, the other side of the gender system eventually became visible too. What was a man supposed to be once the order that assigned him a clear social function stopped looking natural? Feminism first concentrated on the restrictions imposed on women because many of them were legally explicit and politically urgent. But the critique of sex roles contained a broader implication from the beginning. If femininity was not destiny, masculinity could not be destiny either. The breadwinner, the protector, the competitive achiever, the sexually assertive man, the emotionally controlled man, the man who endured fear and pain without displaying them—these figures could no longer remain the invisible standard of adulthood. They became social roles open to analysis.

That realization did not produce one men's movement. It produced several. Some men saw women's liberation as an opportunity to free men from compulsory masculinity as well. Some accepted structural male advantages but wanted men to change in support of sex equality. Others argued that feminist language made male costs invisible and that men needed an autonomous rights movement. Fathers' groups organized around custody and parenthood. Therapeutic and mythopoetic movements sought psychological renewal. Academic fields began studying masculinity as a historical and social construction. These currents overlap. They are not interchangeable. Calling all of them "masculinist" would erase the history that matters. In the United States, the Men's

Liberation movement emerged in the early 1970s in the immediate wake of second-wave feminism.[1][2]

It borrowed some of feminism's methods as well as some of its language. Men formed consciousness-raising groups. They discussed work, sexuality, fathers, fear, competition, emotional isolation, homophobia, relationships, and the pressure to perform masculinity correctly.[1] The central idea was simple but unstable: Rigid sex roles could harm men too. The instability came from the second half of the argument. Men's roles could impose costs while also giving men advantages. That problem would eventually split the movement. In Britain as well, debates over male allies, women-only spaces, and movement autonomy made men's participation a contested question inside Women's Liberation.[9]

Warren Farrell's early work captures the initial possibility particularly well. *The Liberated Man*, published in 1974, belongs to the language of liberation rather than grievance politics.[3] Farrell criticized the expectation that a man should prove his worth through career success, income, protection, sexual performance, and emotional invulnerability. He encouraged men's consciousness-raising groups, supported parental leave, and argued for more flexible family roles.[1][3] The basic proposition was not that men were more oppressed than women. It was that women's liberation could make men freer too. If women no longer had to organize their lives around dependency, men no longer had to organize theirs around compulsory provision. If women could enter public life, men might enter caregiving life.

If women could reject femininity as destiny, men might reject masculinity as obligation. This was a genuinely reciprocal idea of liberation. It also contained a problem that would become

increasingly difficult to solve. The male breadwinner role is an obvious example. A system in which a husband's income sustains the household can give him economic power. It can also turn earning capacity into a measure of masculine worth. A man who loses his job may lose more than income. He may experience the loss as failure in a role he was taught defined him as a man. The same pattern can appear in emotional life. A culture that rewards male toughness and autonomy may make it harder for men to ask for help, admit fear, or acknowledge dependence. Men may gain social status from appearing controlled and self-sufficient while paying costs in intimacy, health, or psychological flexibility.

Herb Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male*, published in 1976, made this language explicit.[4] The book belongs more to popular psychology than to rigorous social science, but it is historically revealing. It presents male privilege and male vulnerability not as mutually exclusive ideas but as competing descriptions of the same social role. The danger is false symmetry. If men suffer because they are expected to succeed and women suffer because they are prevented from succeeding, the two situations cannot simply be added together as equal versions of oppression. Michael Messner's analysis of the 1970s Men's Liberation movement identifies this as one of its central limits.[2] The language of the "male sex role" made it possible to talk about male suffering without directly denying women's subordination. But it often blurred the difference between the cost of holding a privileged position and the cost of being excluded from one.

The distinction is essential. A burden can be real without proving subordination. A privilege can be real without making every member of the group powerful. The difficulty is to identify

each mechanism rather than forcing them into a single moral score. Men's Liberation never became a mass movement comparable to major feminist mobilizations. Historical work describes its activist base as relatively small and disproportionately white, educated, and middle-class.[1] That matters because a movement's social location shapes the problems it notices. A professional man distressed by career competition, emotional isolation, and an absent father is not necessarily living the same masculine experience as a low-wage worker facing dangerous labor, unemployment, racial discrimination, or economic insecurity.

Men's Liberation therefore faced a problem similar to one already visible in some feminist movements. A real experience could become overgeneralized. The pressures of middle-class masculinity could be described as though they defined the condition of men as such. That does not make the problems imaginary. It requires a narrower claim. Men do not experience masculinity in one uniform way. Class, race, sexuality, occupation, family position, age, health, and local culture matter. France developed smaller but related experiments. Male participation in French feminist causes was older than these early-1970s groups.[8] Research on French feminist movements identifies early-1970s men's groups in Paris, including a *Mouvement de libération des hommes* and groups sometimes described as *groupes de libération des mecs*. [7]

Their language was strongly shaped by feminism. They spoke of the "chains" of virility and compulsory masculinity, used discussion groups, and maintained relationships with women in the *Mouvement de libération des femmes*. [7] These groups were tiny. That is part of their significance. They show that male reflection did not begin with today's manosphere and that male

organizing was not automatically anti-feminist from the start. Some men explicitly interpreted feminism as an invitation to examine their own socialization. Later French initiatives, including the network *Pas rôle d'hommes*, continued this line.[7] The phrase captures the basic idea neatly: There is no reason to treat “the male role” as self-evident. Men could discuss violence, fatherhood, sexuality, emotional life, and homosexuality without defining women as enemies.

That possibility would survive even as other men’s movements moved in a different direction. In the United States, one branch of the movement became more explicitly profeminist and antisexist. The Men and Masculinity conferences, beginning in 1975, helped create networks that eventually became the National Organization for Changing Men and later the National Organization for Men Against Sexism, NOMAS.[5] The organization’s own history describes a profeminist, antisexist current that also addressed violence, homophobia, racism, men’s emotional lives, and changing masculinity.[5][6] An internal organizational history is not neutral evidence about the movement’s success. It is useful evidence about what the movement claimed to be. The profeminist solution to the Men’s Liberation dilemma was conceptually clear.

Men can be harmed by masculinity without being subordinated to women as a class. A man can want more room for care, intimacy, fatherhood, vulnerability, or emotional expression while also recognizing that male-dominant institutions historically gave men advantages in other domains. This shifts the question. Instead of asking, “Are men victims too?” the more useful question becomes: Which forms of masculinity produce which harms, for whom, and how can they change without erasing unequal power? That framework avoids a simple sex-

war logic. But it can create a different problem. If every male difficulty is interpreted as merely a “cost of privilege,” men may hear that their problem is real only when it confirms an existing theory about male advantage.

A father who loses contact with a child, a man under intense provider pressure, or a boy failing in school may not experience his problem as a theoretical side effect of privilege. A framework can be internally coherent and still fail to describe how people understand the harm they are reporting. That gap opened space for another branch. The split between profeminist men’s politics and men’s-rights politics did not happen overnight. In the early 1970s, both tendencies could coexist under the broad Men’s Liberation label.[1][2] They often discussed the same problems. Work pressure. Emotional repression. Military obligation. Dangerous jobs. Divorce. Fatherhood. Suicide. The difference increasingly lay in explanation. For profeminist currents, male costs were tied to a gender system that also gave men greater institutional power.

For emerging men’s-rights currents, feminist analysis itself was becoming part of the problem because it emphasized male power while failing to recognize male vulnerability directly. Free Men Inc., associated with Richard Haddad and founded in 1977, marks one stage in this separation.[22] The new emphasis was not simply “men have problems.” Men’s Liberation had already said that. The new emphasis was that public institutions and feminist politics were increasingly recognizing women’s disadvantages while continuing to normalize men’s burdens. The same observation could therefore receive two opposite political meanings. The male breadwinner role could be interpreted as a gender constraint that equality would gradually dissolve. Or it could be interpreted as evidence that men were

expected to sacrifice for women while feminist politics denied that sacrifice.

The phenomenon had not necessarily changed. The political frame had. Warren Farrell's trajectory illustrates that shift unusually clearly. The *Liberated Man* in 1974 treated women's and men's liberation as broadly compatible projects.[3] The *Myth of Male Power*, published in 1993, became one of the most influential texts in men's-rights politics.[1][22] Farrell's later work emphasized male mortality, suicide, dangerous work, economic expectations, and the idea that societies often value men according to their usefulness or disposability. It is easy to narrate this as a simple conversion from feminism to anti-feminism. The continuity is more revealing. Farrell remained concerned with rigid gender roles. What changed was the center of gravity. The earlier question was how men could support women's liberation while becoming freer themselves.

The later question was why a language centered on male power seemed unable to describe men's vulnerabilities. That shift would become one of the foundational tensions of later masculinity politics. Fatherhood became another major site of male organizing. Divorce reform, changing expectations of fatherhood, and the decline of explicit maternal-preference doctrines created a new political situation in the United States. [10][11] Fathers who wanted substantial involvement after separation increasingly organized around custody, visitation, child support, and parental status. The language could be egalitarian. If mothers should not be confined to caregiving, fathers should not be treated as naturally secondary parents. If fathers are expected to become more emotionally and practically involved during a relationship, it becomes harder to

defend the idea that parenting after separation should revert automatically to traditional roles.

This is a coherent consequence of sex equality. It does not prove that family courts systematically discriminate against fathers. That distinction has to remain explicit. A father can experience a genuinely unfair decision. An advocacy group can document recurring grievances. Neither fact establishes a national rate of sex discrimination. Family law is also substantially shaped by state law, and custody decisions depend on requests, prior caregiving, safety, geography, conflict, agreements, and other facts. The empirical question belongs later in this book. Historically, the important point is that fathers' movements developed as fatherhood itself was being redefined. They were not necessarily identical to the men's-rights movement. Some organizations adopted broader anti-feminist interpretations.

Others focused more narrowly on parental involvement or equal treatment. The categories overlap, but collapsing them hides the mechanism. French fathers' movements show the same complexity. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, French press sources documented organizations such as the Mouvement de la condition paternelle and other associations calling for stronger recognition of fathers' educational roles after separation.[12][13][14] Later organizations such as SOS Papa continued this strand of French fatherhood activism.[15] Some arguments were explicitly compatible with women's emancipation: If women should no longer be reduced to motherhood, men should no longer be reduced to economic provision outside daily care. That logic is not inherently anti-feminist. Its factual claims still have to be tested.

Not every men's movement organized around law or political rights. The mythopoetic men's movement, associated especially

with Robert Bly and the success of *Iron John*, moved in a more psychological and symbolic direction.[16][18] Its language emphasized myth, ritual, initiation, male friendship, fathers and sons, grief, emotional recovery, and a search for a masculinity that did not feel either emotionally dead or simply defined as defective. This was not primarily a campaign for custody law, workplace rules, or formal rights. It was an attempt to rebuild male identity. That distinction matters because critics and supporters were often responding to different parts of the phenomenon. For some men, retreats, storytelling, ritual, and same-sex fellowship provided an unusual space for emotional expression and male intimacy.

For critics, the movement risked romanticizing an essential masculine core, idealizing premodern symbols, or blaming feminism and “feminization” for men’s loss of direction.[17] Both dimensions can exist. A movement may help some participants psychologically while relying on a historically weak theory of what men naturally are. The central question is therefore not whether mythopoetic practices were good or bad in the abstract. It is whether the story attached to them was necessary. Men can need friendship, ritual, emotional vocabulary, grief work, or relationships with fathers without requiring a theory that modern society has severed them from an eternal masculine essence. At roughly the same time, masculinity was becoming an academic field rather than only a political or therapeutic concern.

The Men’s Studies Association, created in the early 1980s in connection with antisexist men’s networks, reflected an effort to study men as gendered subjects rather than as the unmarked human norm.[19] The field later expanded through sociology, history, gender studies, psychology, literature, and other

disciplines. This development is easy to misread. Masculinity studies is not another name for the men's-rights movement. Academic work can be profeminist, critical of feminism, descriptive, historical, queer, intersectional, psychological, or politically mixed. The field's importance lies in a methodological shift. Men become objects of gender analysis. That sounds obvious now. It was not obvious when "gender" research often meant research on women while male experience remained unmarked.

Historians of masculinity have since examined fatherhood, war, work, sexuality, race, empire, class, emotion, family, nation, and changing male identities.[20] That work weakens one of the assumptions behind sex-war thinking: There is no single timeless masculinity. Masculinities are historically organized and socially differentiated. A Black man and a white man in the same society may face different masculine expectations. A gay man and a straight man may be judged by different norms. A wealthy professional and an unemployed laborer may possess different relationships to provider status. A soldier, teacher, father, priest, athlete, and artist may inhabit masculinity differently. This does not make sex irrelevant. It makes the category more precise.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the original Men's Liberation space had separated into several recognizable directions.[21] One current remained profeminist and antisexist. One moved toward men's rights. Fathers' groups organized around parenthood and family law. Mythopoetic groups pursued psychological and symbolic renewal. Academic researchers developed masculinity studies. Other men participated in therapy groups, gay liberation, religious movements, violence-prevention work, or local organizations that fit none of these labels neatly. The divergence

reveals a general rule that will matter in the next chapter. A grievance does not determine its ideology. Two men can experience the same pressure to provide and explain it differently. One may see it as a rigid gender role that feminism helps destabilize.

Another may see it as evidence that society exploits men for women's benefit. One may experience divorce as a painful personal and legal conflict. Another may turn that experience into a general theory of family courts. One may seek emotional freedom from masculinity. Another may seek the restoration of a stronger masculine identity. The existence of the grievance does not prove the explanation. But criticizing the explanation does not make the grievance disappear. That distinction is the bridge from men's movements to masculinism. The word masculinism requires special caution in an American edition. In French public and institutional language, masculinisme can function as a relatively broad political label for currents organized around male interests, anti-feminism, or reaction to feminism.

American English does not offer one perfectly equivalent term. Men's rights movement is narrower. Anti-feminism is narrower in another direction. Male supremacy is stronger. Manosphere names an online ecosystem rather than one doctrine. Masculinism exists in English, but it is not consistently used as a standard umbrella term in the same way. This book will therefore preserve a functional definition rather than force a false translation. A men's movement becomes masculinist here when men's problems are organized into a political explanation in which feminism, women, or a social order allegedly structured for women becomes a central causal adversary. That

definition does not apply to every fathers' group. It does not apply to every man who criticizes a feminist claim.

It does not apply automatically to mythopoetic work, masculinity studies, or profeminist men's politics. It describes a shift in explanatory structure. That shift accelerated as men's-rights politics encountered the internet. Older grievances—custody, suicide, work, sexual rejection, status, dating, vulnerability—would soon mix with new communities, new vocabularies, new algorithms, and new forms of identity. The next chapter follows that transformation.

NOTES

[1] Louis Bachaud, "US Men's Liberation in the 1970s: Autopsy of a Movement," *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 2025/2026. Used for the movement's emergence, consciousness-raising, social composition, Warren Farrell, and the later split.

[2] Michael A. Messner, "The Limits of 'The Male Sex Role': An Analysis of the Men's Liberation and Men's Rights Movements' Discourse," *Gender & Society*, 1998. Used for the central tension between male-role costs and institutional male advantage.

[3] Warren Farrell, *The Liberated Man: Beyond Masculinity*, 1974. Used as a primary source for Farrell's early liberation-oriented analysis of breadwinning, emotion, family roles, and consciousness-raising.

[4] Herb Goldberg, *The Hazards of Being Male*, 1976. Used as evidence of the period's popular psychological language around the costs of masculinity, not as general empirical proof.

[5] National Organization for Men Against Sexism, "History." Used as an internal organizational history of the profeminist/antisexist current and the Men and Masculinity conferences.

[6] National Organization for Men Against Sexism, "What We Believe." Used only as the organization's self-description of its profeminist, antisexist, LGBTQ-affirming, antiracist, and anti-violence commitments.

[7] Alban Jacquemart and Bibia Pavard, research on women-only and mixed groups in French feminist movements of the 1970s. Used for French male-liberation groups, "virilité obligatoire," discussion groups, ties to the MLF, and *Pas rôle d'hommes*.

[8] Alban Jacquemart, research on male participation in French feminist movements, 1870–2010. Used to prevent the false impression that male feminist participation began in the 1970s.

[9] Nicholas Owen, "Men and the 1970s British Women's Liberation Movement," *The Historical Journal*, 2013. Used for tensions over male allies, women-only spaces, and movement autonomy.

- [10] Carl Bertoia and Janice Drakich, "The Fathers' Rights Movement: Contradictions in Rhetoric and Practice," *Journal of Family Issues*, 1993. Used for fathers' rights, custody, child support, and the distinction between equality rhetoric and empirical practice.
- [11] *Law and History Review*, "The Custody Crucible." Used for changes in U.S. custody doctrine, challenges to maternal-preference assumptions, and movement toward best-interests standards.
- [12] *Le Monde*, "Quatre associations de pères divorcés," December 31, 1980. Used as a contemporary trace of multiple French fathers' organizations.
- [13] *Le Monde*, "Condition paternelle et condition masculine," February 13, 1979. Used for early French distinctions between paternal-condition and broader male-condition activism.
- [14] *Le Monde*, "Les pères divorcés revendiquent la reconnaissance de leur rôle éducatif," February 7, 1979. Used for contemporary French claims about custody and paternal educational roles.
- [15] *Droit & Société*, research on SOS Papa, 2017. Used for later continuities in French fatherhood activism; current empirical family-law claims are reserved for Chapter 7.
- [16] Richard Karman Gilbert, "Revisiting the Psychology of Men: Robert Bly and the Mytho-Poetic Movement," 1992. Used for the psychological and symbolic aims of the mythopoetic movement.
- [17] Abby L. Ferber, "Racial Warriors and Weekend Warriors," *Men and Masculinities*, 2000. Used for criticism of essentialist and reactionary themes in some mythopoetic discourse.
- [18] Eric Magnuson, "Creating Culture in the Mythopoetic Men's Movement," *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 2007. Used for the local practices, leadership, and culture-building of mythopoetic groups.
- [19] National Organization for Men Against Sexism, "History of the Men's Studies Association." Used as organizational history for the Men's Studies Association and its antisexist origins.
- [20] Erica L. Fraser, "State of the Field: The History of Masculinities," *History*, 2025/2026. Used for the growth of masculinity history as an academic field and its distinction from political movements.
- [21] Clotilde de Maricourt and Stephen R. Burrell, "#MeToo or #MenToo? Expressions of Backlash and Masculinity Politics in the #MeToo Era," 2022. Used for the longer genealogy of masculinity politics and the profeminist/men's-rights divergence.
- [22] Louis Bachaud, detailed article materials on Free Men Inc., Richard Haddad, the men's-rights split, and Warren Farrell's later trajectory.

CHAPTER 6 — Masculinisms: Men's Rights, Anti-Feminism, and the Manosphere

The previous chapter ended at a conceptual boundary. Talking about men's health, fatherhood, loneliness, provider pressure, dangerous work, sexual frustration, or emotional restriction does not by itself define a masculinist politics. The threshold appears when male problems are organized into a broader political story in which feminism, women, or a social order supposedly structured in women's favor becomes a central cause of male decline. That threshold is not perfectly sharp. A criticism of a feminist claim can be specific and legitimate. Anti-feminism is broader: it treats feminism itself as an enduring political adversary. Misogyny is different again: it attributes negative qualities, hostile intentions, inferiority, or contempt to women as a group.

Male supremacy goes further by treating male dominance as desirable or natural. These categories overlap in some movements. They are not synonyms.[13] An American edition needs one additional warning. The French word masculinisme is now widely used in public and institutional debate to describe anti-feminist male politics, but American English has no single equivalent that carries exactly the same scope. "Men's rights" is narrower. "Anti-feminism" names opposition to feminism but not every broader theory of male grievance. "Male supremacy" is stronger. "Manosphere" names an online ecosystem, not one doctrine. This book will therefore use masculinism as an explicitly defined analytical term rather than pretend it is a transparent American label.

Here, a politics is masculinist when male problems are interpreted through a durable political narrative in which

feminism, women, or a social order supposedly favoring women becomes a central causal adversary. The definition matters because it keeps three things separate: A male problem can be real. A feminist explanation of it can be wrong. And a masculinist explanation can also be wrong. The contemporary manosphere is best understood as a networked digital ecosystem rather than a single movement.[1][2][3][4] Its major branches have different histories and different goals. Men's Rights Activists often focus on divorce, custody, child support, military obligation, suicide, education, dangerous work, or perceived discrimination against men. Pick-Up Artists focus on seduction techniques and the strategic acquisition of sexual or romantic success.

Men Going Their Own Way advocate varying degrees of withdrawal from intimate relationships with women. Red Pill communities claim to reveal hidden truths about sexual attraction, female behavior, and gender power. Incel communities organize around involuntary lack of desired sexual or romantic relationships. These communities exchange vocabulary and users. They are not the same community. There is no central leadership, membership card, or unified doctrine. The network is held together more by circulation: concepts, memes, grievances, stories of male victimization, interpretations of feminism, and ideas about what men and women are supposedly like. That decentralization is one reason the manosphere is difficult to study. A statement on one extreme forum cannot be treated as the belief of every user who has watched a masculinity influencer.

A person who follows fitness or dating advice is not automatically part of a coherent political ideology. At the same time, decentralization does not make ideological patterns

unreal. Anti-feminist narratives, misogynistic language, zero-sum accounts of sex equality, and recurrent biological claims are well documented across multiple branches.[1][2][4] The analytical task is to identify the pattern without flattening the population. The clearest continuity with the previous chapter runs through men's-rights politics. After the split within Men's Liberation, some activists increasingly argued that male difficulties could not be understood honestly inside a feminist theory of male power.[12] Problems such as suicide, workplace death, military obligation, child custody, child support, criminal justice, and provider expectations were treated not merely as costs of traditional masculinity but as evidence that society systematically takes male sacrifice for granted.

That intuition should not be dismissed automatically. A society can indeed recognize one vulnerability more readily than another. A legal or institutional rule can outlive the social role that originally justified it. A model of the father as provider and the mother as primary caregiver can continue shaping expectations even after both parents' roles change. A public language built to identify women's disadvantages can fail to notice a male disadvantage in a different domain. The problem appears when local asymmetries become proof of one total system. From "men experience disadvantage here," the argument moves to "society is organized for women." That second claim requires much more evidence. This is where zero-sum thinking becomes politically powerful.

If women gain, men must have lost. If more women enter universities, men were displaced. If women gain sexual autonomy, men lose something they previously possessed. If institutions expand protection from harassment or violence, men become presumptively suspect. If women earn their own

income, male worth collapses. Some changes genuinely do alter competition, bargaining power, or institutional risk. A profession opened to a formerly excluded group creates more competition. Economic independence changes negotiations inside couples. New legal protections can create new compliance obligations and new forms of dispute. But local tradeoffs do not prove that equality itself is a transfer of power from men to women. The zero-sum step is an interpretation. A 2026 study of an incel sample found this kind of zero-sum interpretation of women's gains; it should not be generalized to all manosphere communities.[14]

It is not contained in the fact. Digital platforms transformed masculinity politics by changing how isolated experiences could be aggregated.[5][6] Before large-scale social media, a man convinced that divorce law was unfair, that dating had become hostile, or that feminism ignored him could read a book, join an organization, or write to a publication. Online networks changed the speed. A personal problem could receive a collective explanation immediately. A breakup could be linked to a theory of female nature. A job failure could be linked to a theory of male disposability. Sexual rejection could be translated into a hierarchy of "sexual market value." The internet did not invent the grievances.

It created shared vocabularies through which very different grievances could be connected. It also created markets around them. Recent research on the "neo-manosphere" describes a broader influence economy in which fitness, self-improvement, finance, dating, popular stoicism, entrepreneurship, masculinity coaching, and gender politics can be packaged together.[5] That mixture matters. A young man may enter through material that is not overtly political at all. He wants to get stronger. He wants

to date more successfully. He wants discipline, money, confidence, or purpose. Some advice may be genuinely useful. Exercise is useful. Learning social skills can be useful. Reducing passivity can be useful. The political layer can arrive gradually, attached to an apparently practical pedagogy of masculine success. Recent psychological work has examined perceived threat and identity processes as pathways into anti-feminist manosphere beliefs; those findings should not be generalized beyond the studied samples.[10]

That structure is more influential than a simple manifesto. It offers diagnosis, identity, community, and a program of self-improvement at the same time. The “red pill” metaphor captures this structure unusually well. Borrowed from *The Matrix*, it presents gender politics as an awakening. Before the red pill, the man is naïve. After it, he sees what society allegedly hides about women, desire, status, and power.[1][9] This is more than a set of opinions. It is an epistemology. The convert does not merely acquire information. He acquires a story explaining why ordinary institutions, feminism, mainstream psychology, or women’s own accounts cannot be trusted. That structure makes the worldview resistant to criticism.

An objection can be treated as further evidence that the truth is being concealed. The content of that “truth” often combines popular psychology, evolutionary ideas, status hierarchies, and market metaphors. Female hypergamy. Male competition. Parental-investment differences. A minority of high-status men allegedly monopolizing female attention. The idea that women seek status while men seek youth and beauty. The claim that traditional monogamy once regulated a more brutal natural mating market. Some of these themes touch legitimate scientific questions. Sexual selection is a scientific field. Average sex

differences in mate preferences can be studied. Reproductive asymmetry matters biologically. The problem is not evolutionary psychology itself. Research on manosphere communities shows how scientific findings can be selectively quoted, simplified, mixed with untested “just-so stories,” or converted into moral claims about what women essentially are. [7][8]

That move has to be separated into stages. A statistical tendency is not an individual destiny. An average preference is not a rule followed by every woman. A descriptive hypothesis does not tell us what social norm is morally justified. And a biological difference does not imply that one sex is manipulative, inferior, or owed a particular social arrangement. When those transitions are skipped, science becomes rhetoric. Pick-Up Artists and Men Going Their Own Way illustrate how one worldview can produce opposite behavior. The PUA tradition says, in effect: Learn the game. Improve presentation. Practice approaches. Control anxiety. Use techniques. Increase success. At its mildest, this can resemble ordinary social coaching.

At its worst, it can treat women as targets whose resistance is a tactical obstacle and use manipulation as technique.[2][5] MGTOW draws the opposite strategic conclusion. Do not play the game. Avoid marriage. Reduce financial and emotional exposure. In stronger versions, withdraw from relationships with women almost entirely. The two currents can share a cynical theory of women while disagreeing about what a man should do with it. One seeks greater access. The other seeks withdrawal. Withdrawal itself is not a political problem. A man has every right not to marry. He has every right not to date. A voluntary single life requires no justification. The politics appears when private withdrawal is embedded in a general

theory that presents women as dangerous, manipulative, parasitic, or systematically protected by society.

A movement claiming to free men from women can then remain obsessed with women. The history of incel communities is especially important because the contemporary label is easy to project backward. It should not be. The term grew from Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project in 1997, created by a woman as a support space for people experiencing unwanted celibacy and difficulty forming relationships.[15][16][22] The early project was not male-only. It was not organized around hatred of women. Its purpose was reducing shame, creating mutual recognition, and helping people feel less isolated. That origin matters. It proves that involuntary celibacy and misogyny are not the same phenomenon. Loneliness is not ideology. Sexual inexperience is not ideology.

Repeated rejection is not ideology. The later incel subculture developed through a different online history. Some communities became predominantly male. Some adopted increasingly deterministic explanations of attraction. Some incorporated Red Pill and black-pill language. Some developed strongly misogynistic norms. The category changed. A person suffering involuntary celibacy is therefore not automatically an "incel" in the contemporary ideological sense. The black pill radicalizes the deterministic side of Red Pill thinking. Where a PUA promises techniques and a Red Pill community promises strategic knowledge, the black pill often says that strategy cannot overcome fundamental hierarchy. Facial structure. Height. Body. Race. Status. Genetics. These traits become a near-total explanation of romantic possibility.[17][21] For someone already isolated, that worldview can be psychologically compelling.

It converts repeated personal failure into a coherent model. The immediate effect can feel relieving: There is a reason. The later effect can be devastating: The reason cannot be changed. Recent clinical and review literature finds high levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal ideation, and other mental-health burdens in studied self-identified incel populations.[17][18] This evidence has to be handled carefully. It does not prove that incel ideology causes all of those conditions. People in severe distress may be more likely to enter these communities. The ideology may intensify hopelessness. Both processes can occur together. The important point is that self-directed risk is central to the phenomenon. A policy that sees only potential violence toward women can miss the more common problem of men in serious psychological distress.

The need for clinical caution does not make misogyny unreal. Some incel and manosphere spaces contain dehumanizing language, sexual hostility, fantasies of revenge, and explicit misogynistic extremism.[20][23] A 2026 systematic review synthesizing 105 empirical studies documents the mobilization of sexual-violence-related rhetoric, attitudes, and practices across several manosphere communities.[20] This is substantial evidence. It does not justify treating every lonely man, every self-identified incel, or every user of a manosphere forum as a likely violent offender. The empirical relationship between incel ideology and outward-directed violence remains contested, while self-directed distress and suicidal risk are more consistently documented in the recent literature.[17][19] Those are different levels of analysis. Hostile discourse. Ideological identification.

Threat. Violent act. They should not be collapsed. A prevention strategy that labels all socially isolated men as dangerous may

increase the shame and alienation that brought some people into these spaces. A prevention strategy that ignores openly violent rhetoric is equally irresponsible. The right unit is the actual mechanism. Incel politics also reveals a deeper conflict around equality. What does justice mean in intimate life? A person can be deeply harmed by loneliness. A man can suffer from repeated rejection. He can experience shame, isolation, depression, or humiliation. Those are real problems. But no political system can guarantee equal romantic or sexual outcomes without violating the freedom of other people.

Consent creates a limit on distributive logic. Income can be redistributed. Public services can be expanded. Education can be made more accessible. Desire cannot be allocated through fairness rules without ceasing to be desire. This is one reason the sexual-market language of the manosphere is simultaneously intuitive and misleading. Dating does involve competition. Appearance matters. Status can matter. Social skill matters. Digital platforms may concentrate attention. Some people will have more opportunities than others. But relationships are not ordinary markets. People are not fungible goods. Compatibility, attachment, timing, culture, chance, personality, and mutual preference matter in ways that a ranking model does not capture well. The pain of unequal success is not proof that someone has been denied a right.

That distinction is central to any serious response to male loneliness. Society can reduce isolation. It can improve mental-health access. It can create social spaces. It can reduce humiliation around inexperience. It can teach relational skills. It can challenge appearance-based cruelty. It cannot promise another person's body or desire. France adds a useful linguistic warning. The Haut Conseil à l'Égalité devoted its 2026 report on

sexism to what it called “la menace masculiniste,” drawing in part on a survey of 3,061 people age fifteen and older.[11] That fact demonstrates that masculinisme has become an institutional public term in France. It does not give the word a scientifically final definition. The report is a normative institutional document with its own policy purpose.

Academic literature uses overlapping but not identical categories. American English fragments the field even more. French-language research also traces manosphere codes through influencers, podcasts, self-improvement content, and online anti-feminist culture.[24] Men’s Rights Activist. Anti-feminist. Red Pill. MGTOW. Incel. Male supremacist. Masculinity influencer. Manosphere. Traditionalist. Dating coach. Conservative male commentator. These can overlap. They should not be collapsed merely because they share an audience. The operational definition of masculinism used in this book is therefore deliberately narrower than “content about men.” It is about explanatory structure. When feminism or women become the organizing causal enemy behind a wide range of male grievances, the politics has crossed the relevant threshold. When criticism remains specific, evidence-based, and open to multiple causes, it has not.

The most durable masculinist arguments rarely begin from pure invention. They begin with something real. Men do die by suicide at different rates from women in many settings. Men are concentrated in dangerous occupations. Some boys and men struggle educationally. Some fathers experience painful family conflicts. Some men are lonely. Some people do experience dating markets as brutal. Some institutions can treat male vulnerability poorly. If every one of these facts were false, masculinist politics would be much easier to dismiss. Its

persuasive force comes from a different mechanism: A true observation is attached to an explanation that reaches further than the evidence. The existence of male suicide becomes proof that society values women more.

A custody dispute becomes proof that courts are organized for mothers. A dating failure becomes proof of female hypergamy. A woman's economic independence becomes proof that feminism destroyed men's social function. A violent crime by a woman becomes proof of institutional double standards. The argumentative pattern is consistent. Problem first. Generalized adversary second. That is why factual testing matters more than moral denunciation. A movement can be wrong about the cause and right that the problem exists. It can be right about one mechanism and wrong when it universalizes it. It can contain misogyny while also attracting men whose initial grievance is not misogynistic at all. The empirical work therefore cannot stop at labels.

The next chapter has to test the claims. Do boys and men actually perform worse in school, and where? What do suicide and health statistics show? How should wage gaps and dangerous work be compared? Who experiences which forms of violence? Do men and women receive different treatment in criminal justice? What can be established about custody and parenthood? Are young men increasingly excluded from relationships or sex? And where the distributions differ, what can we actually say about cause? Until those questions are answered, neither feminism nor masculinism is entitled to treat its preferred story as the data.

NOTES

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- [10] Brooke Franklin-Paddock, Michael J. Platow, and Michelle K. Ryan, “From Privilege to Threat: Unraveling Psychological Pathways to the Manosphere,” 2025. Used for threat, identity, and anti-feminist belief pathways; not generalized beyond the studied samples.
- [11] Haut Conseil à l’Égalité, Rapport 2026 sur l’état des lieux du sexisme en France: “la menace masculiniste.” Used as evidence of French institutional vocabulary and the 3,061-person survey; not treated as a neutral scientific definition.
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- [13] Michelle Perrot et al., “L’antiféminisme: un nouveau champ de recherche,” 1998. Used for the distinction between misogyny and organized opposition to feminism.

- [14] Hensman Kettrey and Davis, “Zeroes in a Zero-Sum Game,” 2026. Used for zero-sum interpretations of women’s gains in an incel sample; not generalized to all manosphere communities.
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- [17] “Involuntary Celibacy in the Digital Age,” 2026. Used for black-pill determinism, depression, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal ideation, and the distinction between mental-health burden and contested outward-violence risk.
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- [23] “Fight with words: misogynist extremism on an incel discussion forum,” 2025. Used for violent rhetoric and dehumanization in a highly radicalized forum; not generalized to all involuntary celibates.
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CHAPTER 7 — Where Feminist and Masculinist Claims Meet the Evidence

After following the histories of feminism, men's movements, and masculinity separately, the book reaches the place where their stories collide most directly: contemporary evidence. This is also where slogans become most dangerous. Women earn less than men on broad measures of pay. Men die by suicide at much higher rates. Women report far more sexual violence. Men account for the overwhelming majority of fatal occupational injuries and prisoners. Girls outperform boys in reading. Boys retain an average advantage in mathematics. Mothers are far more likely than fathers to be the parent with whom children live when the other parent is outside the household. Almost every movement can select a true statistic.

The hard part is deciding what the statistic means. The first rule of this chapter is therefore simple: there will be no scoreboard. A wage ratio, a suicide rate, a reading score, a sexual-violence prevalence estimate, and a prison count cannot be added into one moral balance sheet. They describe different phenomena, use different units, arise through different mechanisms, and concern different populations. A group can hold an advantage in one domain and a serious vulnerability in another. The correct unit of analysis is not "men versus women." It is the mechanism producing each asymmetry. Education provides a useful first test because the American pattern already refuses a one-directional story.

In the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, fourth-grade boys in public schools had an average reading score of 210, compared with 218 for girls.[1] That is not a tiny conceptual distinction. Reading competence affects performance

across subjects, later coursework, and access to educational credentials. Mathematics points in the other direction. In 2024 NAEP mathematics, boys averaged 240 at grade 4 compared with 235 for girls, and 276 at grade 8 compared with 272 for girls.[2] Adult educational attainment adds another layer. Among Americans age twenty-five and older in 2022, 36.8 percent of women had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 34.5 percent of men. High-school completion or higher was also slightly more common among women, 90.4 percent compared with 88.9 percent among men.[3]

These results make one claim difficult to sustain: American education cannot be described accurately as a system in which girls are simply losing everywhere. They also make the opposite claim difficult to sustain. Boys' weaker reading performance and lower adult educational attainment on these measures are real. A men's movement that asks why boys struggle in reading, why some young men disengage from school, or why women have moved ahead in degree attainment is asking a legitimate question. The evidence does not, however, establish the stronger masculinist claim that schools have become institutions designed to favor girls. A score gap does not identify its cause. The sex of teachers does not prove bias.

Possible mechanisms include early language development, peer culture, behavior, social expectations, school engagement, family conditions, socioeconomic status, instructional practice, and the way masculinity is performed among some groups of boys. Different mechanisms may operate in different populations. The math results are also a warning against total explanations. If the same school system produces a female advantage in reading and a male advantage in mathematics, "the school favors one sex" is too crude as a causal theory. The

feminist angle has its own risk. For decades, an important part of equality policy focused on girls' access to advanced mathematics, science, and male-dominated fields. That problem did not become meaningless because girls improved elsewhere. But a framework that still treats education only as a story of female disadvantage will miss boys who are now behind on other indicators.

The correct conclusion is asymmetric. Girls and women show advantages on some educational measures. Boys show an average advantage in mathematics. Those facts can coexist. The health picture is even more resistant to a single narrative. In 2024, life expectancy at birth in the United States was 81.4 years for women and 76.5 years for men—a gap of 4.9 years.[4] That difference is large enough that it should not be treated as background noise. It does not tell us why it exists. Biology may contribute. So can smoking, alcohol, drug use, violence, occupational exposure, driving, cardiovascular risk, health-care use, social isolation, income, and patterns of risk across the life course.

The mistake would be to reduce a multicausal mortality gap to one theory of masculinity—or to declare it politically uninteresting because men have held more institutional power historically. Suicide sharpens the problem. Final 2024 CDC data put the age-adjusted suicide rate at 22.3 deaths per 100,000 males and 5.6 per 100,000 females.[5] Male suicide mortality is therefore roughly four times female mortality. That is a major male vulnerability. Ignoring it because men are advantaged in some other domain would be exactly the kind of scorekeeping this chapter rejects. But suicide deaths are not the same thing as every form of suicidal distress. In the 2025 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, among adolescents ages twelve to

seventeen, 6.7 percent of boys and 15.4 percent of girls fell into SAMHSA's combined category of serious suicidal thoughts, making a suicide plan, and/or attempting suicide.[6]

The endpoint changes the sex pattern. Deaths are much more male. This grouped nonfatal adolescent measure is much more female. The conclusion is not that one sex is mentally healthier. It is that "suicide" and "mental health" are too broad to function as single indicators. Method lethality, help-seeking, diagnosis, substance use, family conditions, social pressure, access to care, and age can matter differently. A feminist analysis may reasonably ask whether masculine norms of stoicism, self-reliance, and reluctance to seek help increase risk for some men. That remains a hypothesis about mechanisms, not a complete explanation. A masculinist analysis may correctly insist that male suicide mortality deserves independent political attention. It goes too far if it treats those deaths as proof that society values women more.

The mortality difference is a fact. The theory of social value is an interpretation. The labor market generates one of the most familiar feminist statistics and one of the most familiar masculinist counter-statistics. Both can be true. In 2025, among full-time wage and salary workers, median usual weekly earnings were \$1,089 for women and \$1,326 for men. Women's median was 82.1 percent of men's.[7] Because October data were not collected during the federal shutdown, the BLS annual estimate is based on eleven months. The ratio is useful. It is also often misdescribed. It is not a measure of a woman and a man being paid differently for the same job.

It compares broad populations. Occupation, industry, work schedule, age, experience, geography, hierarchy, parenthood, education, and other variables can affect the distribution. Direct

discrimination can affect it too. The aggregate figure does not tell us how much each mechanism contributes. The existence of multiple mechanisms does not make the difference irrelevant. A large aggregate gap can be a signal that deserves explanation. If women and men sort into different occupations, the next question is why. If parenthood affects careers differently, that mechanism matters. If discrimination persists within firms or occupations, that matters. If preferences, constraints, physical demands, or working hours differ, those matter too. A serious equality analysis has to decompose the gap rather than either naturalize it or treat it as a ready-made discrimination rate.

Now look at fatal occupational risk. In 2024, the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded 5,070 fatal work injuries in the United States. Of those deaths, 4,657 were men and 413 were women.[8] Men therefore accounted for about 92 percent of occupational fatalities. That is not a small male cost of the labor market. It also is not evidence that employers are killing men because they are men. Occupational segregation matters enormously. Men are more concentrated in transportation, construction, extraction, agriculture, heavy manual work, and other jobs with high fatal-injury exposure. The feminist and masculinist mistakes mirror one another. A labor analysis that talks only about earnings and executive positions can miss dangerous work and bodily risk.

A labor analysis that talks only about fatal injuries can miss earnings, promotion, unpaid care, and occupational exclusion. There is no scientific reason to decide which statistic “counts more.” They measure different things. The better question is why the labor market distributes reward, time, physical risk, and family constraints differently. Few topics produce more distorted sex comparisons than violence. The reason is simple.

“Violence” is not one phenomenon. Start with general nonfatal violent victimization. In the 2024 National Crime Victimization Survey, 1.49 percent of males age twelve or older experienced at least one violent victimization, compared with 1.42 percent of females.[9] On this broad measure, the percentages are very close.

That fact is important because it blocks an overly broad statement that violence is overwhelmingly something women experience and men do not. Now change the measure. In the CDC’s 2023/2024 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 45.1 percent of women reported some form of contact sexual violence over their lifetime, compared with 16.9 percent of men. For the previous twelve months, the estimates were 5.5 percent of women and 2.1 percent of men.[10] Change the context again. For contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner over the lifetime, NISVS estimated 34.0 percent among women and 17.0 percent among men. When the survey additionally required an intimate-partner-violence-related impact, the estimates were 29.9 percent for women and 13.0 percent for men.[11]

These are not contradictions. They are different kinds of violence. The sex pattern of broad violent victimization is not the same as the sex pattern of sexual violence or intimate-partner violence. This is why both popular feminist and popular masculinist rhetoric can become misleading even when each quotes a real statistic. One side can select sexual violence and imply that male victimization is marginal. The other can select a general victimization measure and imply that feminist attention to violence against women is statistically baseless. Neither conclusion follows. Men are victims of violence. Women are

substantially more likely to report several forms of sexual and intimate-partner violence in the latest NISVS estimates.

Both facts belong in the same analysis. The measurement system matters too. NCVS and NISVS use different survey designs, question frames, definitions, and populations.[12] The 2023/2024 NISVS series also uses updated methods, which means historical comparisons require care. A number without its instrument can become propaganda very quickly. The same principle applies to perpetrators. Much violence against men is committed by other men. That matters if the causal question is about masculinity, criminal opportunity, group conflict, or exposure to public violence. Sex of victim and sex of offender answer different questions. A policy can therefore be targeted without turning a statistical category into a moral identity. Services may be strongly oriented toward women where women are the majority of victims of a particular severe or sexual form of violence.

They should still be accessible to male victims. Recognizing an asymmetry does not require erasing the minority. The criminal-justice system creates perhaps the strongest aggregate male disadvantage in the book. At yearend 2023, among people sentenced to more than one year in state or federal prison, 1,124,400 were male and 85,900 were female. Men made up 93 percent of that population.[13] It is tempting to look at a number that extreme and treat it as self-explanatory. It is not. Men and women do not enter the justice system with identical distributions of offense type, violence, criminal history, recidivism, and other sentencing-relevant factors. If one population commits more serious or repeated offenses, equal procedure will not produce equal incarceration rates.

Statistical parity in prison cannot be the standard of justice. But the opposite inference is too strong as well. Different behavior does not prove that the system treats comparable defendants identically. The U.S. Sentencing Commission studied more than 300,000 people sentenced for a federal felony or Class A misdemeanor during fiscal years 2017 through 2021 and used models controlling for available offense and personal characteristics.[14] Across all sentences, females received sentences that were 29.2 percent shorter on average than males. Females were 39.6 percent more likely to receive probation. Among cases in which imprisonment was imposed, females received prison terms 11.3 percent shorter than males. Those findings are not a national measure of every American court.

They concern the federal system. They also do not prove that sex itself causes the entire remaining difference. The Commission explicitly warns that its data lack some information on charging decisions, plea bargaining, law-enforcement choices, and other relevant case or personal characteristics. The correct conclusion is therefore narrower. The overwhelmingly male prison population cannot be interpreted as bias simply from the count. At the same time, the best federal analysis retained substantial sentencing differences associated with sex after controlling for the variables available to the Commission. That residual deserves explanation. The report also shows why American race and ethnicity categories sometimes have to enter this book. The Commission found different patterns among its categories of White, Black, Hispanic, and Other defendants, analyzed separately by sex. Those categories belong to the data system and the research question. They should not be treated as timeless or universal human types.

For example, Black and Hispanic male defendants in the study received longer sentences than White male defendants across all cases, although the gaps narrowed substantially when the analysis was limited to incarceration length after imprisonment had already been chosen.[14] That interaction matters. A gender comparison that ignores race can hide one dimension of the sentencing process. A race comparison that ignores sex can hide another. This is exactly the kind of context in which U.S.-specific categories become analytically necessary rather than decorative. Family separation is one of the most emotionally charged areas of masculinist politics. It is also one of the easiest places to overclaim. The Census Bureau's 2022 child-support data identify 10.9 million custodial mothers and 3.0 million custodial fathers—parents living with their own children under twenty-one while the other parent lived outside the household. [15]

Among 13.9 million custodial parents, 41.0 percent had either a court order or an informal agreement to receive financial support from the noncustodial parent. Custodial mothers were more likely to have an order or agreement, 43.2 percent, than custodial fathers, 33.4 percent. Among custodial parents with child-support agreements, 91.0 percent reported that the arrangement was a formal legal order.[15] Living-arrangement data show the same broad asymmetry. In 2023, among children under eighteen, 20.0 percent lived with their mother only and 5.1 percent with their father only. Most lived with two married parents, and another group lived with two unmarried parents or a guardian.[16] The residential asymmetry is real. It does not tell us why it exists.

A mother-only household is not evidence that a judge preferred a mother over an equally situated father. The data do not tell us

who asked for what arrangement, whether parents agreed, how care had been divided before separation, whether violence or safety issues were present, how close the parents lived, what work schedules they had, or what happened in the subset of genuinely contested judicial decisions. The feminist story can overreach by treating maternal residence as self-evidently the product of fathers' lower caregiving investment. The masculinist story can overreach by treating it as self-evidently the product of anti-father courts. The national data used here establish neither. This is one of the places where the right answer is documentary insufficiency.

Family law is heavily shaped by states, and a national estimate of judicial sex discrimination would require detailed, current, matched information on parental requests, agreements, caregiving histories, conflict, safety, and adjudicated outcomes. That evidence was not found in a sufficiently comparable national form for this edition. The book will not invent it. That does not invalidate individual reports of unfairness. A father can be treated unjustly. A mother can be treated unjustly. A family court can make a bad decision. The point is narrower: anecdotes cannot be converted into a national discrimination rate, and living-arrangement statistics cannot supply the missing causal chain. Loneliness has become one of the central grievances in contemporary discussion of men.

It deserves serious attention. It also demonstrates how quickly a broad social problem can be reduced to one sex and one cause. Beginning in 2024, the federal Household Pulse Survey added questions on loneliness, social support, and social isolation.[17] A 2026 analysis of 50,900 adults from the August–September 2024 phase, weighted to represent roughly 256 million U.S. adults, estimated that 12.7 percent usually or always felt lonely

and 20.6 percent rarely or never received social or emotional support.[18] The variation was broad. Young adults showed particularly high loneliness. So did people in several other demographic and socioeconomic positions. Marital status, income, education, sexual orientation or gender identity, functional limitation, geography, and social participation all mattered in the study.

This is not the profile of a problem that can be reduced to “men cannot get dates.” The Census Bureau has continued publishing more recent experimental social-connectedness tables through the Household Trends and Outlook Pulse Survey in 2026.[19] Those releases are useful for ongoing monitoring, but no sex-specific figure from them is inserted here without direct extraction and methodological checking. That choice is deliberate. A current debate can make an old number look fresher than it is. The evidence used here supports several claims. Loneliness is widespread. It is especially high among young adults. It is related to far more than sexual partnership. It varies with material and social conditions.

What it does not yet support, from the sources selected for this chapter, is a simple national claim that loneliness is primarily a male phenomenon in the United States. Nor does it support the idea that women’s partner preferences are its dominant cause. A man can be lonely because he has no partner. He can also be lonely because he has no close friends, no community, no stable work, weak family ties, poor health, or no place where he feels useful. A policy response that interprets all male loneliness as sexual deprivation will miss much of the problem. Sexual inactivity is narrower than loneliness and easier to sensationalize. There is real evidence of a young-male shift.

A 2020 analysis of nationally representative General Social Survey data from 2000 through 2018 found that among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, the share of men reporting no sexual activity in the previous year rose from 18.9 percent in 2000–2002 to 30.9 percent in 2016–2018. Among women of the same age, the estimate rose from 15.1 to 19.1 percent, but the female trend was not statistically significant.[20] Among adults ages twenty-five to thirty-four in 2016–2018, sexual inactivity was much closer: 14.1 percent for men and 12.6 percent for women. The increase among young men was real in that historical series. It was concentrated largely among unmarried men and associated with factors including lower income, part-time employment or unemployment, and student status.

That finding deserves more respect than either ideological extreme usually gives it. It is not imaginary male grievance. It also does not prove a permanent sexual underclass created by female emancipation. The data stop in 2018. The United States now has newer public-use data from the 2022–2023 National Survey of Family Growth for male and female respondents.[21] But the published products reviewed for this book do not yet provide a clean, current national tabulation of past-year sexual inactivity by sex that is directly comparable to the GSS study. That means the honest sentence is historical: Young male sexual inactivity increased substantially through 2018 in the GSS data. It does not authorize the sentence:

A third of young American men are sexually excluded today. Those are different claims. Older NSFG data also caution against a total sex-divergence narrative. In 2017–2019, mean age at first vaginal intercourse was 17.1 years among women and 17.2 among men.[22] That measure does not answer the current inactivity question, but it demonstrates why sexual trajectories

need more than one indicator. Most importantly, no distribution of sexual opportunity creates an entitlement to another person. A man can suffer profoundly from rejection, inexperience, or lack of intimacy. That suffering can deserve empathy, mental-health support, social connection, and freedom from humiliation. It does not create a claim on a woman's body. Consent is the boundary where a distributive model stops.

A society can redistribute income. It can expand services. It can create better social environments. It can help people build relational skills. It cannot allocate desire. That does not make sexual inequality irrelevant. It means the policy question is about the conditions that help people form relationships freely, not about guaranteeing equal romantic outcomes. The evidence in this chapter does not produce one winner. It produces a map of different asymmetries. Girls outperform boys in reading, while boys retain an average mathematics advantage. Women have a slight advantage in adult educational attainment. Men live shorter lives and die by suicide at far higher rates, while adolescent girls report far more nonfatal suicidal distress on the SAMHSA grouped measure used here.

Men earn more on the BLS weekly-earnings measure and account for nearly all fatal occupational injuries. Men and women have similar prevalence of broad violent victimization in the 2024 NCVS, while women report much more sexual violence and intimate-partner violence in the latest NISVS. Men make up the overwhelming majority of prisoners, and the federal sentencing system still shows sex-associated differences after statistical controls. Children are much more likely to live with a mother only than a father only, but the national statistics do not establish a rate of anti-father judicial discrimination.

Loneliness is substantial and particularly high among young adults, but it is not reducible to sex or sexual access.

Young male sexual inactivity rose sharply through 2018, but current national claims require fresher analysis. No single concept explains all of this. “Patriarchy” may illuminate mechanisms in some domains and become too broad in others. “Gynocentrism” may name a perceived pattern but does not substitute for causal evidence. “Male privilege” does not explain why men die at work. “Male disposability” does not explain the earnings gap. “Female victimhood” does not describe general violent victimization. “Anti-male courts” do not follow from maternal residence statistics. The empirical discipline has to remain local. The same rule applies to political response. If boys lag in reading, help boys read. If women face high sexual-violence risk, prevent and respond to sexual violence.

If men die by suicide at extreme rates, design prevention that actually reaches men. If women’s earnings remain lower, identify the mechanisms producing the difference instead of arguing from the aggregate alone. If men dominate occupational deaths, reduce risk in the jobs where deaths occur. If a justice system shows residual disparities after relevant controls, investigate the disparity rather than either declaring discrimination proved or pretending the residual does not exist. If family-court data are inadequate, improve the data. If people are lonely, treat social isolation as a human problem rather than a sexual entitlement. This approach is less satisfying to movements because it does not give one group a final moral theory of the other.

It is more useful for the same reason. The central empirical conclusion of the book is not that feminism was right or that masculinism was right. It is that both become unreliable when

the suffering they reveal is turned into a total theory of society. A real asymmetry deserves a response. It does not earn an ideology immunity from evidence. The next chapter can therefore leave the competition of diagnoses and ask a different question: What would equality look like if it were designed around mechanisms, real freedoms, and reciprocal responsibilities rather than around the permanent victory of one sex?

NOTES

[1] NAEP/NCES, 2024 Reading Assessment. Used for national public-school grade-four reading scores by sex.

[2] National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics / National Science Foundation, Science and Engineering Indicators 2026, using NAEP 2024 mathematics data. Used for grade-four and grade-eight average mathematics scores by sex.

[3] National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 104.88. Used for 2022 high-school completion and bachelor's-or-higher attainment among people age twenty-five and older by sex.

[4] CDC/NCHS, "Life Expectancy" and Mortality in the United States, 2024. Used for final 2024 life expectancy at birth by sex.

[5] CDC/NCHS Data Brief 572, "Changes in Suicide Rates in the United States From 2023 to 2024." Used for final 2024 age-adjusted suicide death rates by sex.

[6] SAMHSA, 2025 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Detailed Tables, Section 7 PE. Used for the combined adolescent suicidality measure by sex among ages twelve to seventeen.

[7] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers — 2025." Used for median weekly earnings among full-time wage and salary workers and the 2025 eleven-month methodological caveat.

[8] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, 2024, Table A-7. Used for total fatal occupational injuries and counts by sex.

[9] Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal Victimization, 2024. Used for the percentage of males and females age twelve or older who experienced at least one violent victimization in 2024.

[10] CDC, National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 2023/2024 Sexual Violence Data Brief. Used for lifetime and twelve-month contact sexual-violence prevalence among adult women and men.

[11] CDC, National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 2023/2024 Intimate Partner Violence Data Brief. Used for lifetime and twelve-month measures of contact

sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner and IPV-related impact.

[12] CDC, NISVS methodology and documentation; CDC guidance on differences among U.S. sexual-victimization surveys. Used to keep NISVS and NCVS measures conceptually separate and to flag methodology changes.

[13] Bureau of Justice Statistics, Preliminary Data Release: Prisons, 2023. Used for the sex composition of people sentenced to more than one year in state or federal prison.

[14] U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2023 Demographic Differences in Federal Sentencing. Used for federal sentencing differences by sex and race/ethnicity during fiscal years 2017–2021 and the report’s limitations.

[15] U.S. Census Bureau, Custodial Parents and Their Child Support: 2022. Used for custodial-mother/father counts and child-support order/agreement statistics.

[16] U.S. Census Bureau, A Child’s Day: Parental Interaction, Extracurricular Activities, and School Engagement: 2023. Used for children’s living arrangements.

[17] CDC/NCHS, Household Pulse Survey, “Lack of Social Connection.” Used for the introduction of loneliness, social-support, and social-isolation measures in 2024.

[18] David T. Zhu, Suhanee Mitragotri, and John C. Lin, “Prevalence of Loneliness and Social Isolation by Demographic, Socioeconomic, and Other Factors: Estimates From the 2024 Household Pulse Survey,” *Community Mental Health Journal*, 2026. Used for 2024 frequent-loneliness and perceived-isolation estimates and their multidimensional distribution.

[19] U.S. Census Bureau, Household Trends and Outlook Pulse Survey, 2026 social-connectedness tables. Used only to establish the existence of more recent experimental federal monitoring; no unverified sex-specific value is imported.

[20] Peter Ueda et al., “Trends in Frequency of Sexual Activity and Number of Sexual Partners Among Adults Aged 18 to 44 Years in the US, 2000–2018,” *JAMA Network Open*, 2020. Used for historical changes in past-year sexual inactivity by age and sex.

[21] CDC/NCHS, National Survey of Family Growth, 2022–2023 Public-Use Data Files. Used to establish the availability of newer microdata and the limits of published tabulations used in this chapter.

[22] CDC/NCHS, NSFG Key Statistics, 2017–2019. Used for mean age at first vaginal intercourse by sex as a separate sexual-trajectory indicator.

CHAPTER 8 — Reciprocal Emancipation

After the history, the ideological conflicts, and the empirical tests, it would be easy to end with an appeal for women and men to “understand each other better.” That would be too easy. The disagreements examined in this book are not all misunderstandings. Some are genuine conflicts among values and interests. When is a difference a choice and when is it a constraint? When should protection override neutrality? When should a sex category remain stable for law, statistics, medicine, or policy, and when should it be more open? Should equality mean identical treatment, equal capability, impartial procedure, or equal outcomes? Reciprocal emancipation is not sentimental reconciliation. It is a method for deciding among those conflicts without making either sex the permanent moral judge of the other.

The most defensible starting principle remains legal equality. John Stuart Mill’s nineteenth-century argument against privileges and disabilities attached to sex remains powerful because it establishes a presumption: a person should not lose a legal right, property right, educational opportunity, occupation, civic voice, or legal capacity simply because that person is male or female.[1] But the history in this book also shows why formal equality is sometimes incomplete. A person can possess a right and lack the practical ability to use it. The capability approach is useful here without becoming the philosophy of the book. Freedom is more than abstract permission; it concerns what a person is actually able to do under real material and institutional conditions.[2][3]

A woman can legally work and still have no realistic employment option because child care is unavailable or prohibitively expensive. A man can legally seek psychological

help and still face cost, access barriers, scheduling problems, or a social environment that treats asking for help as failure. The existence of a formal right matters. So do the conditions under which the right can be exercised. That does not imply compulsory equality of outcomes. Free people can choose differently. Populations can produce different distributions without injustice being the only possible explanation. A persistent disparity is a reason to investigate, not a verdict already delivered.[11] The first practical rule is therefore: When the relevant situation is genuinely comparable, sex should neither open a privilege nor close an opportunity.

The second rule follows immediately: When the relevant situations are not comparable, justice does not require mechanical symmetry. Pregnancy is not physically symmetrical. The latest U.S. evidence reviewed in the previous chapter shows that sexual and intimate-partner violence are not distributed symmetrically, that suicide mortality is not distributed symmetrically, and that fatal occupational risk is not distributed symmetrically.[12] A fair policy can therefore focus more heavily on women in one domain and more heavily on men in another. There is no contradiction. Symmetry asks whether two categories receive the same treatment. Reciprocity asks whether each person is treated as a subject whose freedom, safety, interests, and responsibilities count equally. That distinction is crucial.

Pregnancy creates an unavoidable bodily asymmetry between the pregnant person and the biological father. Decision-making cannot be perfectly symmetrical when the physical burden is not symmetrical. But asymmetry in bodily authority does not make the father morally irrelevant to every consequence of conception, birth, and parenthood. Justice has to recognize the

difference that matters without using it to erase every other relationship and responsibility. The same principle applies beyond reproduction. A rule can be formally neutral and still be badly designed if it ignores a relevant difference. A rule can distinguish by sex and still be legitimate if the distinction responds to a measured difference, is proportionate to the problem, and does not become a general license for hierarchy.

“Men and women are different” is not enough to justify a restriction. “Men and women are equal” is not enough to prove that every policy must be identical. The relevant difference has to be shown. Autonomy is the second pillar. It should not be confused with an imaginary person who needs no one. Relational theories of autonomy emphasize that people become capable of choosing through relationships, education, resources, institutions, trust, and care.[4][5] Everyone is dependent at some point. Children depend on adults. Sick people depend on care. Parents depend on time, money, and support. Older people may depend on family members or professionals. Workers depend on institutions and other workers.

Dependence is not the opposite of autonomy. Some forms of dependence make autonomy possible. This matters because feminist politics correctly exposed the way unpaid or underpaid care could limit women’s economic independence. But care itself cannot simply be abolished. Someone still has to feed a child, stay home with a sick family member, organize appointments, clean a home, maintain relationships, earn income, manage paperwork, or provide material security. Care ethics made those forms of dependence and labor politically visible.[8][9] Its own critics are right to warn against turning that visibility into a new female essence. Valuing care must not

become a renewed obligation for women to care. The same logic applies to provision.

Recognizing the value of supporting a family materially must not make provision a compulsory test of manhood. A reciprocal emancipation protects two freedoms at once: the freedom to leave a traditional role, and the freedom to choose it. A woman who chooses to devote several years primarily to children or family care is not automatically less emancipated. A man who chooses to carry more financial responsibility in a relationship is not automatically reproducing oppression. The problem appears when the arrangement is imposed, when it is not realistically revisable, when it destroys one person's basic independence, or when a cost is denied because "that is what women do" or "that is what men do."

Defending choice does not require pretending choices appear from nowhere. A woman may reduce paid work because child care costs more than the income she would retain. A man may accept longer hours because his income is higher, because the household depends on it, or because he believes his value as a partner depends on provision. Those choices can be rational. They can also be shaped by institutions, incentives, and norms. Calling a decision socially influenced does not make it fake. Calling it a choice does not make the conditions irrelevant. This is why reversibility matters. The longer a role closes future options, the more carefully its costs should be understood.

A person who leaves the labor market for ten years may lose income, retirement contributions, professional networks, and bargaining power. A person who becomes the sole provider may become unable to reduce work without threatening the household's stability. A division of labor can be freely chosen and still generate future dependency. Good policy does not have

to prohibit specialized couples in order to reduce those risks. Retirement protections, portable benefits, access to child care, usable leave, realistic reentry into employment, and shared recognition of caregiving can make choices less irreversible. Freedom is stronger when one decision does not silently close every later alternative. Parenthood makes the difference between reciprocal equality and symmetry especially clear.

Pregnancy and childbirth are bodily asymmetries. After birth, however, children need time, care, presence, money, safety, and continuity. Those contributions are not inherently female or male. A society that wants involved fathers has to make paternal involvement practically possible. A society that wants mothers to have meaningful economic autonomy cannot assume that mothers will automatically remain the default parent for daily care. After separation, sex should not function as a shortcut for parental competence. Nor should one preferred arrangement become ideology. The U.S. evidence reviewed in the previous chapter shows a strong residential asymmetry: children living with one parent are far more often living with mothers than fathers.[12] What it does not show is a national rate of judicial discrimination against fathers or mothers.

The data used in this book do not tell us, nationally and comparably, who requested what arrangement, what parents agreed to, how caregiving had been divided, what safety concerns existed, or how judges resolved otherwise comparable contested cases. Reciprocity therefore requires two forms of restraint. Do not presume that a mother is the better parent because she is the mother. Do not presume that a father was discriminated against merely because the child lives primarily with the mother. The relevant questions are the child's safety, meaningful relationships, actual caregiving history, availability,

stability, geography, cooperation, and the specific facts of the family. Parental equality also cannot mean rights without duties. A father asking to be treated as a fully capable parent must be prepared to perform the ordinary work of parenting: appointments, school, illness, routines, scheduling, emotional labor, and professional sacrifice.

A mother asking for economic equality must also accept that fatherhood can become more than financial provision. Greater paternal involvement and greater maternal autonomy can reinforce one another. Sexuality creates a different kind of problem because reciprocity cannot guarantee equal outcomes. Consent means that a person has a right to refuse sex or a relationship. That refusal does not have to be compensated because the other person is lonely. No principle of equality can create an entitlement to another person's desire. This is a hard boundary on distributive thinking. Income, services, education, and opportunities can be redistributed or expanded. Desire cannot be redistributed without abolishing the freedom that gives consent its meaning.

That does not justify indifference to loneliness, rejection, or sexual inexperience. Chapter 7 found a real historical increase in past-year sexual inactivity among young American men through 2018, while the current magnitude is less certain from the published national evidence used here.[12] The correct response is neither moral suspicion nor an invented promise of sexual equality. Loneliness, poor social skills, shame around inexperience, mental-health problems, weak friendship networks, lack of community, and difficulty entering relationships are legitimate human problems. A society can help people become more capable of relationships. It cannot promise them another person. This distinction avoids two symmetrical

errors. One error says that any male frustration is simply the unavoidable price of female freedom and therefore deserves no collective attention.

The other turns female freedom into the cause of an injustice against men. A better response defends the right of every person to refuse while also treating isolation and social disconnection as real problems rather than moral defects. The same mechanism applies in the other direction. Women can experience appearance pressure, sexual coercion, double standards, harassment, or degrading relationship norms without making every individual man personally responsible for the culture in which those norms developed. Political analysis should identify the mechanism rather than assign inherited guilt to the opposite sex. Violence provides the clearest case for proportional, sex-aware policy. The American evidence did not show one universal sex pattern. Broad nonfatal violent victimization was very similar for males and females in the 2024 NCVS.

Sexual violence and intimate-partner violence were much more commonly reported by women in the latest NISVS. A reciprocal policy does not need to pretend these patterns are symmetrical. [12] It can invest heavily in services and prevention for women where women bear a larger measured burden. It should still recognize male victims. It can address forms of public or interpersonal violence that heavily affect men without treating that as a rebuttal to sexual-violence policy. The underlying rule is proportionality. A targeted policy should respond to the frequency, severity, and mechanism of a measured risk. It should remain open to people outside the modal category who suffer the same harm. Recognition is not a scarce resource.

One group's vulnerability does not become more real when the other group's is denied. Criminal justice requires especially strong procedural reciprocity because the state can remove liberty. Individuals should be judged for acts, evidence, relevant history, and legally legitimate factors—not for a statistical reputation attached to sex. Chapter 7 found two facts that must remain together. Men are the overwhelming majority of the prison population. Federal sentencing research also found substantial sex-associated sentencing differences after controlling for available case and personal characteristics.[12] The first fact prevents us from interpreting aggregate imprisonment as proof of bias. The second prevents us from assuming that different offense distributions explain every difference in treatment.

The proper goal is not equal incarceration rates. It is impartial procedure. When a residual disparity remains after relevant controls, investigate it. If a legitimate factor explains it, say so. If not, correct the process. The same standard should apply whatever group appears to benefit. That is reciprocal equality in its most procedural form. Education requires the same willingness to update. The American evidence reviewed here gives girls an advantage in reading and women a modest advantage in adult degree attainment, while boys retain an average advantage in mathematics.[12] Those distributions do not justify a permanent politics of one disadvantaged sex. They justify targeted inquiry. If boys are behind in reading, investigate why and respond.

If girls or women remain underrepresented in particular technical fields despite adequate preparation, investigate why and respond. One intervention does not invalidate the other. The policy should follow the measured problem. This sounds

obvious. Political movements often find it difficult because institutions and narratives have memory. A program created when one gap was large can survive after the gap has changed. A movement organized around revealing one group's disadvantage can be slow to recognize a disadvantage in the other. Reciprocal emancipation requires policies that can be revised when the data change. Employment shows why multiple forms of inequality can coexist without canceling one another. In the U.S. data used in Chapter 7, men had substantially higher median weekly earnings among full-time wage and salary workers.

Men also accounted for nearly 92 percent of fatal occupational injuries.[12] A serious labor policy has no reason to choose which asymmetry deserves moral permission to exist. Unjustified sex discrimination should be reduced. Women should have real access to high-paying and high-status work. Occupational death and injury should be reduced in the jobs where men are heavily exposed. Family policy should reduce constraints that force one sex into care or the other into provision. These are compatible goals. They become incompatible only inside a political theory that treats attention as a zero-sum resource. The deeper target is compulsory role assignment. Women should not be valued according to domestic availability. Men should not be valued according to whether they earn more than a partner or can absorb unlimited work and risk.

This does not imply that couples must divide every task and every dollar fifty-fifty. It means that specialization should not be dictated in advance by sex. Nancy Fraser's distinction between recognition and redistribution remains useful at this point.[6][7] A person can be respected symbolically while lacking the

resources necessary to act freely. A person can possess resources while being treated as lesser in status. Sex equality often requires attention to both. Recognizing fatherhood while making paternal caregiving practically impossible is incomplete. Allowing women into employment while ignoring harassment or structural barriers is incomplete. Telling men that emotional vulnerability is acceptable while designing services they do not realistically use is incomplete.

Celebrating care while leaving the caregiver economically precarious is incomplete. Recognition without capacity can become symbolic. Resources without recognition can leave hierarchy intact. The point is not to adopt one complete philosophical theory. It is to keep the two questions visible: Can the person actually act? And is the person treated as a full participant? Statistical groups are necessary for policy. Individuals are not their group averages. The previous chapter used sex categories because risks and outcomes are often distributed differently. That does not make a particular man suicidal because male suicide mortality is high. It does not make a particular woman a victim because women report more sexual violence.

It does not make a man criminal because men dominate prison populations. It does not make a woman educationally advantaged because women hold more degrees on average. Policy needs categories. Moral judgment needs persons. Confusing the two is one of the easiest ways for equality politics to become unjust. This also applies to American race and ethnicity statistics. Where race or Hispanic origin materially changes the analysis, the categories used by Census, CDC, NCES, BJS, or USSC may be necessary. They should remain what they are: administrative or analytic categories tied to a source,

population, and question. They are not inherited moral characters. Reciprocal emancipation therefore has to reject collective guilt.

Men alive today are not personally guilty for the Napoleonic Code, historic denial of women's suffrage, or professional exclusions simply because they are men. Women alive today are not responsible for male suicide, a man's loneliness, or a court decision simply because they are women. That does not mean history disappears. Institutions, wealth, norms, and habits can transmit advantages and costs across generations. A person can benefit from a structure he did not create. A person can suffer from a structure she did not create. Public policy can address inherited effects without declaring the current beneficiary morally guilty for the origin of the structure. Responsibility becomes more precise when it is attached to acts, rules, institutions, decisions, and preventable consequences rather than to sex itself.

The same discipline should apply to movements. A feminist organization can be responsible for a policy it promoted. A men's-rights organization can be responsible for a false claim it circulated. Neither transfers guilt automatically to all women or all men. A reform is not proven just because its goal is just. This principle matters because movements often evaluate policies by intention. Protect victims. Increase representation. Support parents. Reduce discrimination. All are defensible goals. The specific mechanism can still fail. A victim-protection rule can be poorly designed. A representation policy can create rigid categories or miss the actual barrier. A family policy can help a primary caregiver while making the other parent's involvement harder.

A workplace reform can shift behavior in an unintended direction. Good intentions do not eliminate tradeoffs. Reciprocal emancipation therefore needs feedback. Before a reform: state the problem, the mechanism, the expected benefit, the relevant costs, and the population affected. After a reform: measure what changed. If the predicted result did not occur, change the theory or the policy. A movement committed to emancipation should prefer correction over preserving the symbolic victory of its own proposal. This is one of the deepest lessons of the empirical chapter. A problem can be real while the proposed explanation is wrong. A policy can be well intentioned while its effects are poor. A theory earns credibility by surviving correction, not by making itself impossible to test.

This book has not treated feminism and masculinism as symmetrical historical movements. They are not. Feminism arose in response to extensive legal and political subordination of women and helped dismantle real incapacities. Contemporary masculinisms emerged much later, often in reaction to feminism and to transformations in male roles. Historical asymmetry matters. Methodological accountability can nevertheless be reciprocal. A feminist claim should be testable. A masculinist claim should be testable. A feminist policy should be evaluated by its effects. A men's policy should be evaluated by its effects. Neither movement receives factual immunity because it correctly identified some other injustice. This is where bell hooks's broad conception of feminism as opposition to sexism rather than opposition to men remains useful.[10]

Taken seriously, that conception allows a feminist politics to defend a man when he is treated unjustly because of sex. It also allows a politics concerned with men to defend women's

autonomy without contradiction. The object becomes the unjust mechanism. Not permanent victory for a group. A practical reciprocity test can be stated this way: If the relevant circumstances were reversed, would the same rule still look legitimate? This is useful only after identifying what counts as a relevant circumstance. If two equally situated defendants receive different treatment solely because one is male and one female, reversal exposes a problem. If two equally qualified workers are judged by different standards solely because of sex, reversal exposes a problem.

But a mechanical reversal fails when the relevant situation is not symmetrical. Pregnancy cannot simply be reversed. A sex-specific health risk cannot be wished away. Different victimization patterns can justify differently targeted prevention. Reciprocity therefore requires two tests. First: are the situations materially comparable? Second: if they are, does sex change the rule without sufficient justification? This protects universalism without pretending bodies and social distributions are identical. It also protects attention to difference without making difference a license for hierarchy. The proposal in this chapter is deliberately limited. It is not a final theory of sex, gender, justice, family, or human freedom. It does not replace feminism with a new doctrine and does not rehabilitate masculinism as its mirror.

It is a decision method distilled from what survived the book's inquiry. Several practical principles follow. No legal incapacity or privilege should attach to sex without a relevant and proportionate justification. Formal freedom should be tested against the real conditions required to exercise it. Traditional roles should be neither compulsory nor automatically discredited when adults choose them freely. Roles should

remain as revisable as practical life permits, especially when they create long-term dependency. Care and material provision are human responsibilities, not female and male essences. Parental rights should travel with parental responsibilities. Sexual freedom includes the right to refuse and therefore excludes a guaranteed equality of romantic outcomes. Targeted policies should follow measured risks rather than inherited political categories.

Criminal procedures should be impartial even when group-level behavior differs. Statistical groups should guide investigation and policy without becoming moral identities. Reforms should be evaluated by effects and corrected when they fail. Historical structure should be remembered without converting sex into inherited guilt. These rules do not eliminate conflict. They make conflict arguable. A free society cannot guarantee that women and men will have identical preferences, experiences, vulnerabilities, or interests. It can require that differences be justified by reality rather than inherited hierarchy. It can allow women to discuss violence without first proving that men suffer less. It can allow men to discuss suicide without turning women into the cause.

It can recognize maternal care without reducing mothers to care. It can recognize fatherhood without turning every separation into an indictment of feminism. It can acknowledge a female earnings disadvantage and a male occupational-death burden without asking which statistic cancels the other. The sex war loses some of its fuel when one group's pain no longer requires the other group's invalidation. The final question of this book is therefore no longer which movement wins. It is what remains of feminism and masculinism once both accept the same discipline: history without inherited guilt, evidence

without a scoreboard, freedom without entitlement to another person, difference without automatic hierarchy, and a willingness to revise the story when reality refuses to fit it.

NOTES

[1] John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 1869. Used for the presumption against legal privilege or disability attached to sex.

[2] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “The Capability Approach.” Used for the distinction between formal rights and substantive opportunities or capabilities.

[3] Martha C. Nussbaum, “Human Rights and Human Capabilities,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal*. Used for material and institutional conditions of effective freedom; the chapter does not adopt Nussbaum’s complete substantive list.

[4] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy.” Used for relational autonomy and the social conditions that can support or constrain self-government.

[5] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy.” Used for autonomy as self-government and debates over social influence and adaptive preferences.

[6] Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition,” *New Left Review*, 2000. Used for participatory parity and the interaction of status and resources.

[7] Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition?” *New Left Review*, 1995. Used for the relation between economic redistribution and cultural/status recognition.

[8] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Feminist Ethics.” Used for care, dependency, vulnerability, responsibility, and critiques of essentializing care as feminine.

[9] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Feminist Bioethics.” Used for relational autonomy, ordinary human dependency, and institutional distribution of care.

[10] bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 2000. Used for the broad program of feminism as opposition to sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression rather than opposition to men.

[11] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Equality of Opportunity.” Used to distinguish equal rules, conditions of access, and outcomes.

[12] Chapter 7, “Where Feminist and Masculinist Claims Meet the Evidence,” stabilized U.S. adaptation. Used as the empirical base for education, health, suicide, work, violence, criminal justice, parenthood, loneliness, and sexuality.

CONCLUSION — Neither Victors nor Innocents

This book began with a problem that now shapes almost every public argument about relations between women and men: each camp possesses enough facts to sustain its preferred story, but neither possesses the whole of reality. Feminism can point to a long history of legal incapacity, economic dependence, reproductive control, sexual and intimate violence, restricted citizenship, and sex-specific expectations imposed on women. Men's movements can point to male obligations and vulnerabilities in education, health, suicide, dangerous work, criminal justice, parenthood, loneliness, and other areas that do not disappear merely because men historically occupied more positions of formal authority. Both sets of facts are real. They do not cancel one another.

That coexistence is precisely why any story in which one sex is the sole subject of domination and the other the sole subject of suffering eventually breaks down. Historical asymmetry still matters. Women and men did not enter modern equality from identical positions. Feminism and masculinism did not arise from the same political situation, fight the same legal disabilities, or acquire the same institutional role. Women had to obtain rights from which they were formally excluded. Contemporary men's politics developed largely within societies already transformed by those struggles, as male roles changed, some traditional monopolies disappeared, and previously underpoliticized male vulnerabilities became more visible. Treating those histories as symmetrical would be false.

Applying the same critical standard to the claims made in their name is not. One principle survived every chapter of this book

more reliably than any ideology: The existence of a problem does not prove the story offered to explain it. A woman can experience discrimination without every difference between women and men being caused by discrimination. A man can experience an unjust family decision without the national family-law system thereby becoming a feminist conspiracy. A victim can tell the truth about violence without one experience becoming a statistical theory of an entire sex. A boy can struggle at school without schools being designed for girls. A woman can earn less on a broad population measure without that number being a direct measure of unequal pay for identical work.

A man can be lonely without women's freedom being the cause of his loneliness. Suffering is a reason to investigate. It is not an exemption from investigation. The same standard applies to concepts. Patriarchy can illuminate real historical structures of male authority. It becomes weaker when it explains a contemporary outcome before the mechanism has been identified. Toxic masculinity can describe destructive norms around aggression, emotional restriction, dominance, or risk. It becomes caricature when masculinity itself is treated as presumptively pathological. Hypergamy can refer to a specific preference or empirical pattern. It becomes ideology when it is transformed into a universal law of female nature. Gynocentrism can name a perception that a system protects or prioritizes women. The word does not itself demonstrate that such a system exists.

A useful concept distinguishes. A bad concept makes looking unnecessary. The history examined here also shows that relations between the sexes are never organized by power alone. They include duties, protections, dependencies, vulnerabilities, resources, risks, and expectations. A system can

give one group more authority in one domain while imposing a costly obligation on it in another. It can protect a group in a way that also makes that group dependent. It can praise a role so strongly that the praised role becomes compulsory. This complexity does not turn hierarchy into innocent “complementarity.” It prevents hierarchy from becoming the only dimension we can see. The traditional family made this especially clear.

A husband could possess greater legal authority while a wife had less independent legal standing. At the same time, the male role could carry strong expectations of provision, protection, public responsibility, and—in particular historical settings—military duty. Those male obligations did not erase women’s dependence. Women’s dependence did not make those obligations imaginary. Once the legal hierarchy weakened, both sides of the relationship changed. Women gained forms of agency that had been denied or restricted. Men lost forms of authority that no longer had a legitimate basis. But obligations and expectations did not disappear at exactly the same speed. That desynchronization helps explain some contemporary conflict. A woman may be expected to be economically independent while still doing more care work.

A man may be expected to be an equal caregiver while still being judged heavily by income, initiative, status, or the ability to absorb risk. A society can reject the old hierarchy before it has built a coherent replacement for every role that hierarchy once organized. Some women therefore experience modern equality as rights gained without every burden disappearing. Some men experience it as authority lost without every obligation disappearing. Both experiences can be sincere. Neither proves that the other sex designed the problem. Chapter

7 made the central empirical lesson difficult to avoid. The American evidence does not align into one moral hierarchy. Girls outperform boys in reading, while boys retain an average advantage in mathematics.

Women now have a modest advantage in adult educational attainment on the measures examined. Men live shorter lives and die by suicide at far higher rates, while some measures of nonfatal suicidal distress follow a different sex pattern. Men have higher median weekly earnings among full-time wage and salary workers, while men also account for nearly all fatal occupational injuries. Broad violent victimization is distributed much more evenly than sexual and intimate-partner violence, which are reported much more often by women. Men make up the overwhelming majority of prisoners, while federal sentencing research still identifies sex-associated differences after controlling for many available case characteristics. Children are far more likely to live with a mother only than a father only, but those residence figures do not establish a national rate of judicial bias against fathers.

Young men experienced a substantial historical rise in sexual inactivity through 2018, but the current magnitude cannot honestly be inferred from that older series. Loneliness is real and widespread, especially among young adults, but the evidence reviewed does not reduce it to one sex or to sexual access. None of these findings erases the others. None can be converted into a common unit. There is no scientific operation by which a suicide rate can be subtracted from a wage ratio, an occupational death added to a sexual assault, or a reading gap weighed against a prison sentence. The desire to do so is political, not empirical. Once that is recognized, the question “Who is really oppressed?” becomes too broad to guide policy.

A more useful question is: What mechanism produces this particular asymmetry, and what response follows from that mechanism? A boy struggling to read does not need men to be globally oppressed before his difficulty deserves attention. A woman facing sexual violence does not need women to suffer more on every social indicator before she deserves protection. A man dying by suicide does not become less dead because men earn more on average. A woman earning less does not become better paid because men die more often at work. Recognition does not require cancellation. That is one of the most important exits from the sex war. The same discipline is necessary when group statistics enter public debate.

Statistics need categories. People do not have to become those categories. A higher male suicide rate does not make a particular man suicidal. A higher female prevalence of sexual violence does not make a particular woman a victim. A male majority among offenders does not turn an individual man into a presumptive threat. A female majority among custodial parents does not prove that a particular mother is the better parent. American race and ethnicity categories create the same danger. They are sometimes necessary because they reveal patterns hidden inside a national average. Federal sentencing research, for example, changes when sex and the report's race and ethnicity categories are examined together.

But a category created for a statistical system is not an essence. It has a definition, a historical setting, a measurement rule, and a limited analytical purpose. The mistake begins when a population-level pattern becomes a moral judgment about an individual. That mistake fuels the sex war more reliably than almost any factual disagreement. "The group is more often associated with X" becomes "people in the group are X."

Description becomes identity. Probability becomes accusation. History becomes inherited guilt. No man alive today is personally guilty of a legal disability imposed on women a century ago merely because he is male. No woman is responsible for male suicide, a man's loneliness, or a judicial decision merely because she is female.

History can transmit institutions, norms, unequal starting points, resources, and costs. It does not automatically transmit moral guilt. Responsibility becomes more serious, not less serious, when it is assigned precisely. A person can be responsible for an act. An institution can be responsible for a rule. A movement can be responsible for a campaign. A government can be responsible for a policy. A society can be responsible for maintaining an injustice once it is known. Collective sex guilt makes those real forms of responsibility harder to see. This is the point most likely to be misunderstood in the title of this conclusion. "Neither innocent" does not mean women and men are both collectively guilty.

It does not mean that historical domination must be balanced by an equivalent moral charge against women. It does not mean that every conflict has equal responsibility on both sides. The phrase concerns movements, institutions, narratives, and theories. No framework should be declared innocent of examination because it speaks in the name of a harmed group. No movement should receive factual immunity because it has correctly identified another injustice. No institution should be trusted merely because its stated aim is equality. And no elegant theory should be protected from evidence by redefining every contrary fact as further proof of the theory. Feminism has produced powerful analyses of legal inequality, work,

reproduction, sexuality, violence, culture, care, and the construction of gender roles.

It has also produced overgeneralizations. Some feminist arguments have minimized male vulnerability, treated men too easily as a coherent class, or converted statistical differences into presumed mechanisms of power. Recognizing those failures does not undo the reforms in which feminist movements played a major role. Masculinist politics must survive an equally demanding test. Some of its starting observations concern real problems: male suicide, dangerous work, educational difficulty, paternal conflict, loneliness, provider pressure, and forms of psychological distress. But parts of masculinist discourse then convert those problems into a generalized theory in which feminism, women, or a woman-centered social order becomes the common cause. The evidence reviewed here does not support that total theory.

A real grievance does not protect an explanation from criticism. Neither feminism nor masculinism becomes more truthful by turning its best insight into a theory of everything. The word “victors” fails for a different reason. No movement wins by proving that the other sex suffers less. No sex wins when recognition of its problems depends on denying the problems of the other. And no durable emancipation can be built on the permanent symbolic defeat of half the population. Feminism historically required conflict because real institutions resisted women’s equality. Some problems could not be solved through a polite reconciliation of interests. Legal disabilities had to be removed. Power had to be redistributed.

Violence had to be named. Rules had to change. That conflict should not be rewritten as a historical mistake merely because equality is now a widely accepted principle. But a successful

movement faces a later danger. The categories that helped it identify an injustice in one period can become too rigid for a transformed reality. A movement that cannot update its map after changing the territory eventually confuses loyalty with truth. Men's movements face the inverse problem. They can provide language for vulnerabilities that have been neglected. They become intellectually dependent when those vulnerabilities can only be explained by keeping feminism permanently guilty. A politics for men becomes more autonomous, not less, when it can defend men without constructing women as the necessary adversary.

That requires maturity from both directions. Feminist politics must be able to recognize a male problem without treating it automatically as the justified price of male privilege. Politics concerned with men must be able to recognize a gain in women's freedom without treating it automatically as a loss imposed on men. This does not eliminate zero-sum conflicts. Some resources are limited. Some court decisions necessarily favor one claim over another. Some negotiations divide finite time or money. Sexual consent contains the clearest case: one person may want a relationship or sexual encounter and the other may refuse. There is no fair outcome that gives both people what they want. Freedom requires protecting the refusal even though it leaves the other person frustrated.

Justice does not eliminate every loss. It determines which claims may legitimately override which others. Other changes can benefit both sexes at once. Greater paternal involvement can reduce maternal care burdens. Women's economic autonomy can reduce the expectation that a man must support a household alone. Better male mental-health support can reduce suffering without costing women a right. Reducing dangerous

work can protect overwhelmingly male workers without weakening equal-employment goals. Better relationship education can strengthen consent while helping people form healthier relationships. Reciprocal emancipation is therefore not the belief that interests always harmonize. It is the refusal to turn every difference of interest into a permanent war between sexes. The broadest conclusion of this book is methodological.

Relations between women and men are too complex to be governed well by one total theory of domination, victimhood, biology, resentment, or liberation. That does not condemn us to indecision. It demands better criteria. A legal disability attached to sex requires justification by a relevant difference, not tradition. Formal permission should be distinguished from real ability to act. A statistical difference should be explained before it is declared unjust. A targeted policy should respond to a measured risk and remain proportionate to it. Responsibility should follow acts, decisions, and institutions rather than inherited group guilt. Roles should be as open to exit as possible, even when people freely choose traditional arrangements.

The costs created by a reform should be examined as seriously as its stated intention. When evidence is insufficient, uncertainty should remain visible. These principles do not solve every case in advance. That is their advantage. A doctrine that already knows the answer before looking becomes incapable of learning. A method that allows correction can remain demanding without becoming totalizing. The same rule applies to reciprocal emancipation itself. It must not become the next concept that makes investigation unnecessary. It is not a final theory of sex, gender, family, justice, work, or human freedom. It is a discipline: Identify what actually limits freedom. Identify who carries the cost. Ask which mechanism produces it.

Act at the level of that mechanism. Then look again at what the intervention actually changed. Some conflicts will remain. Some should remain. Violence, discrimination, and genuine incapacity do not become negotiable merely because compromise sounds civilized. Other conflicts are sustained artificially because admitting one fact has been made equivalent to betraying one's political identity. The central task is learning to tell those two kinds of conflict apart. The sex war thrives when every concession becomes betrayal, every contrary fact becomes hostile propaganda, and every person is treated as an ambassador for a category. There is no single institutional reform that can eliminate that dynamic. There are, however, intellectual habits that resist it.

Refuse statistics without context. Separate population patterns from individual judgment. Ask for a causal mechanism. Accept uncertainty where the data stop. Recognize a genuine problem even when it is used by a movement you distrust. Abandon an explanation when the evidence no longer supports it. These habits look modest. They change the debate completely. They allow a woman to say, "This harm affects women much more often," without making men her collective enemy. They allow a man to say, "This problem affects men disproportionately," without making feminism its automatic cause. They also allow us to recognize problems for which sex is not the best explanatory category at all. Class, age, health, disability, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, occupation, geography, family history, and individual trajectory can become more important depending on the question.

Sex remains relevant. It stops being sovereign. For centuries, societies used sex to prescribe large parts of a person's expected life. A contemporary politics obsessed with sex can reproduce

that centrality in a new form by asking people to understand themselves first as members of opposing sexual camps. Emancipation should move in the other direction. It should reduce the amount of unnecessary destiny assigned by sex without pretending sex has ceased to exist. A person should be able to be a man without one compulsory masculinity. A person should be able to be a woman without one compulsory femininity. People should also be able to choose forms of life that look traditional without automatically being declared oppressed, toxic, or politically suspect, as long as those arrangements remain compatible with the freedom and dignity of others.

The goal is not a society without bodies, sex, history, attachment, or difference. It is a society in which those facts determine less of a life than they need to. At that point the question “Who won?” begins to lose its meaning. Women gain when possibilities once closed become genuinely available. Men gain when arbitrary obligations become more negotiable and real vulnerabilities can be acknowledged without humiliation. Children gain when parenthood is organized around care, safety, responsibility, and actual relationship rather than automatic sex assumptions. Society gains when protecting one person no longer requires degrading another. No reform ends the story. Every emancipation changes the environment in which people make choices.

A victory can move a cost elsewhere. The collapse of an old role can create a vacuum into which a simplifying ideology moves. A policy intended to correct one injustice can create a new barrier or preserve an old assumption in a new form. Emancipation therefore has to remain revisable. This book offers no final equilibrium between the sexes. It offers a way to keep

correcting the relationship when reality changes. Neither victors, because the freedom of one sex cannot be built durably on the symbolic defeat of the other. Neither innocents, because no movement, institution, or theory should be exempt from examination of its blind spots, interests, and effects.

But people, always, before camps. People capable of being different without becoming hierarchized. Connected without being possessed. Responsible without being collectively guilty. Vulnerable without turning vulnerability into a claim to dominate. If a politics of relations between the sexes still deserves to be called emancipatory, it is on that condition: That it increases each person's real possibility of becoming the subject of their own life without reducing someone else to the necessary obstacle to that freedom.

What Is the Noosophical Movement?

The Noosophical movement is a project of research, transmission, and transformation. It seeks to understand reality more accurately, connect bodies of knowledge that are often studied separately, make important knowledge accessible, and turn these understandings into works, practices, tools, or institutions that can be confronted with their effects and corrected.

It is therefore not limited to a philosophy. It can work on education, health, agriculture, economics, politics, human relationships, culture, institutions, the sciences, spirituality, or artificial intelligence. Depending on the subject, it may produce a book, a method, an experiment, a critique, a practical tool, or an institutional proposal.

One central idea of the movement is that accumulating knowledge is not enough. We also need to learn how to connect different forms of knowledge without confusing them. Understanding agriculture, for example, requires looking at soils, plants, energy, economics, labor, food habits, and environmental effects. Connecting these dimensions does not mean reducing them to one explanation: each field retains its own methods and standards of evidence.

The movement also seeks to transmit knowledge. Important knowledge should not depend entirely on a lucky encounter, the social environment into which someone was born, or a late discovery. Part of the Noosophical project is therefore to identify, verify, condense, and make genuinely accessible the knowledge that can help a person understand the world more clearly, care for themselves, exercise their rights, and gain autonomy.

The movement takes its name from Noosophy, which in its philosophy refers to a truth or structure of reality that exists independently of how we understand it. The world does not become true because we have successfully explained it: it exists and functions independently of our theories, beliefs, and institutions. We may understand some things correctly, misunderstand others, or still perceive only a small part of them.

For that reason, the Noosophical movement does not regard its own texts as infallible. An idea must remain open to comparison with available knowledge, to objections, to testing where possible, and to correction when it does not withstand reality.

Noosophy is therefore not only something to think about. The Noosophical movement seeks to make what is understood useful, transmissible, and capable of transforming the real world.

How This Book Was Produced

This book was produced through successive stages rather than by automatically generating a complete text. Its subject, goals, and general direction were first defined by a human. Noosophy AI then helped explore the subject, research and compare sources, build possible structures, and bring arguments, objections, and areas of uncertainty into view.

The manuscript was developed progressively, chapter by chapter. Proposed text was reviewed, discussed, corrected, or rejected when it did not fit the project, contained insufficiently supported claims, or oversimplified the subject. Distinct phases of documentary research, drafting, critique, coherence checking, and assembly were used where necessary.

Artificial intelligence is therefore not treated here as a source of authority. It acts as an active tool for research, formulation, comparison, and testing. Its proposals can be wrong and remain open to revision.

The published version results from this iterative work, successive corrections, and final human validation. The method seeks to use the capacities of artificial intelligence without transferring to it decisions about the purpose of the book, value choices, or the decision to publish.

About Hieronymus Anonymus

Hieronimus Anonymus is the human initiator of the Integrative Noosophy project. His work focuses on connecting fields of knowledge and practice that are usually studied separately, as well as experimenting with new forms of collaboration between humans and artificial intelligence. He participates in the design, discussion, revision, and validation of works published by Éditions Noosophie.

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FEMINISM & MASCULINISM

History, Tensions, and Reciprocal Emancipation

Feminism and masculinity are more than opposing camps. This book traces the rise of feminism, the transformations it helped bring about, changing expectations of men, the emergence of men's-rights and masculinist movements, and the places where competing narratives collide.

Without taking sides or forcing a false symmetry of grievances, it separates documented gains from ideological overreach and asks what reciprocal emancipation could require in law, work, family life, violence, justice, and intimate relationships.

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