Feminists' Double Standards About Child Care

by Phyllis Schlafly Jan. 11, 2006

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When the feminist movement burst onto the American social scene in the 1970s, the rallying cry was "liberation." The feminists demanded liberation from the role of the housewife and mother who lived in what Betty Friedan famously labeled a "comfortable concentration camp."

Feminist ideology taught that the duties of the housewife and mother were (in Friedan's words) "endless, monotonous, unrewarding" and "peculiarly suited to the capacities of feeble-minded girls." Society's expectation that a mother should care for her own children was cited as oppression of women by our male-dominated patriarchal society from which women must be liberated so they can achieve fulfillment in workforce careers just like men.

Articulating vintage feminism in the 1974 Harvard Educational Review, Hillary Clinton wrote disparagingly about wives who are in "a dependency relationship" which, she said, is akin to "slavery and the Indian reservation system."

Demanding that husbands take on equal duties in child care, the National Organization for Women passed resolutions in the 1970s stating, "The father has equal responsibility with the mother for the child care role."

In 1972, "Ms." Magazine featured pre-marriage contracts declaring housewives independent from essential housework and babycare, and obliging the husband to do half the dishes and diapers. As a model, "Ms." published the Shulmans' marriage agreement, which divided child-care duties as follows:

"Husband does Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Wife does Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Friday is split according to who has done extra work. All usual child care, plus special activities, is split equally. Husband is free all day Saturday, wife is free all Sunday."

Then-ACLU attorney Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote in her 1977 book "Sex Bias in the U.S. Code" that "all legislation based on the breadwinning-husband, dependent-homemaking-wife pattern" must be eliminated "to reflect the equality principle" because "a scheme built upon the breadwinning husband [and] dependent homemaking wife concept inevitably treats the woman's efforts or aspirations in the economic sector as less important than the man's."

Feminist literature is filled with putdowns of the role of housewife and mother. This ideology led directly to feminist insistence that the taxpayers provide (in Ginsburg's words) "a comprehensive program of government-supported child care."

The icon of college women's studies courses, Simone de Beauvoir, opined that "marriage is an obscene bourgeois institution," and easy divorce became a primary goal of the feminist liberation movement. Three-fourths of divorces are now unilaterally initiated by wives without any requirement to allege fault on the part of the cast-off husband.

As divorces became easy to get, the feminists suddenly did a total about-face in their demand that fathers share equally in child care. Upon divorce, mothers demand total legal and physical custody and control of their children, arguing that

only a mother is capable of providing their proper care and upbringing, and a father's only function is to provide a paycheck.

Gone are the demands that the father change diapers or tend to a sick child. Feminists want the father out of sight except maybe for a few hours a month of visitation at her discretion.

Suddenly, the ex-husband is targeted as a totally essential breadwinner, and the ex-wife is eager to proclaim her dependency. Feminists assert that, after divorce, child care should be almost solely the mother's job, dependency is desirable, and providing financial support should be almost solely the father's job.

It is settled law in the United States that parents (note the plural) have a fundamental right to the care, custody and control of the upbringing of their children. But feminists have persuaded the family courts, upon divorce, to acquiesce in feminist demands that the mother typically be given 80 to 100 percent of those fundamental rights that belonged to both parents before divorce.

What's behind this feminist reversal about motherhood? As Freud famously asked, "what does a woman want?"

The explanation appears to be the maxim, Follow the money. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the feminists used their political clout to get Congress to pass draconian post-divorce support-enforcement laws that use the full power of government to give the divorced mother cash income proportional to the percentage of custody time she persuades the court to award, but unrelated to what she spends for the children or to her willingness to allow the father to see his children.

Since the father typically has higher income than the mother, giving near-total custody to the mother enables the states to maximize transfer payments and

thereby collect bigger cash bonuses from the federal government. When fathers appeal to the family courts for equal time with their children, they are opposed by a big industry of lawyers, psychologists, custody evaluators, domestic-violence agitators, and government bureaucrats who make their living out of denying fathers their fundamental rights.

It's time for a national debate and discussion of the taxpayer incentives that favor divorce, the anti-marriage feminists, and the resulting exclusion of fathers from the lives of their children.