Feminism Is Mugged By Reality

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The feminist revolution that swept across America in the 1970s promoted the dream of a land in which at least half of corporate officers, Fortune 500 C.E.Os, partners in law firms, and doctors would be women. The feminist movement was always elitist; it was about getting political and corporate power for educated women.

But a funny thing happened on the way to achieving that promise. Feminism was mugged by the reality that most women don't seek those goals.

How the best and the brightest are rejecting the career track laid out for them by the feminists is detailed in a lengthy new article titled "The Opt-Out Revolution" by Lisa Belkin in the persistently feminist New York Times Magazine. That is the same publication that a few years ago featured a cover glamorizing the feminists' number-one role model as Saint Hillary Clinton in radiant white robes.

Ms. Belkin interviewed hundreds of women and presented as typical a group in Atlanta, all of whom had graduated from Princeton more or less twenty years ago, earned advanced degrees in law or business from other prestigious institutions such as Harvard and Columbia, and waited until their thirties to marry and have children because their careers were so exciting.

Eager graduates during the heyday of feminism, they felt both entitled and obligated to make good. As one of them told Ms. Belkin, what she then wanted was to be "a confirmed single person, childless, a world traveler."

These Atlanta women are typical: for the last couple of decades, roughly half of M.B.A.s, J.D.s, and M.D.s have been granted to women. In the feminist game plan, these are the very women who should now be at the top of the business and professional world, wielding the fantasy power attributed to the tiny percentage at the top.

But of these ten Princeton graduates interviewed by Ms. Belkin at a book-club meeting, five are not employed outside the home, one is in business with her husband, one is employed part time, two freelance, and the only one with a full-time job has no children. Nationwide, only 16 percent of corporate officers are women, only eight Fortune 500 companies have female C.E.O.s., and only 38 percent of Harvard Business School 1980s female graduates are now working full time.

Feminist ideology for years has preached that if women fail to cross those thresholds of power, it is because women are held down by a "glass ceiling" imposed by a discriminatory and oppressive male-dominated society. But these smart, talented, successful women told Ms. Belkin that they opted out of their accelerating careers voluntarily.

The work days kept getting longer and longer, and the women walked away from six-figure incomes. Typical comments were: "I don't want to be on the fast track leading to a partnership at a prestigious law firm." "I don't want to conquer the world; I don't want that kind of life."

One easily predictable explanation for this attitude is, in one Belkin quote, that many women never get near the glass ceiling because "they are stopped long before by the maternal wall."

These women don't admit that they abandoned the workforce because their children needed them. They said they opted out because "life got in the way"; they were "no longer willing to work as hard, commuting, navigating office politics," and "balancing all that with the needs of a family."

One woman told Ms. Belkin that she is just not interested "in forging ahead and climbing a power structure," and "that is one of the inherent differences between the sexes." She quickly caught herself after making such a politically incorrect statement, adding, "to turn that into dogma is dangerous and false."

One of the Atlanta group staunchly maintained that "the exodus of professional women from the workplace isn't really about motherhood; it's really about work. ... Quitting is driven as much from the job- dissatisfaction side as from the pull-to-motherhood side."

Princeton University, a former male citadel, is now run largely by women, and Ms. Belkin interviewed the president, Shirley Tilghman. Commenting on her current crop of female students, she said that for every one "who looks at an Amy [Gutmann, the Provost] or an Ann-Marie [Slaughter, dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs] and says, 'I want to be like her,' there are three who say, 'I want to be anything but her.'"

It turns out that the workplace (like child care) has its drudgery, its long hours, its repetitious duties, its demands that an employee accommodate herself to the schedule of others. Maybe the home is a pleasanter and more fulfilling work environment than the office, after all.

I wonder if someday a feminist will ever say the office is "a comfortable concentration camp," as Betty Friedan famously described the home of an affluent suburban housewife. Or if a feminist will ever admit that there is an eternal difference between men and women in their goals and in how they want to live their lives.