



Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era

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Consumerism, Individualism, and Anti-Activism

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Abstract and Keywords

Postfeminism is distinguished by the depoliticization of feminist goals and an opposition to collective feminist action. A central emphasis on individualism and consumerism replaces resistance and collective action as sites for women's empowerment. Drawing from and appropriating the language associated with words such as "empowerment" and "choice," these elements are then converted into an individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in a new guise as a substitute for feminism. The chapter examines how popular culture dismisses much of the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements of women's liberation, such as sexual freedom and economic independence. Chapter 1 also examines recent psychological research on the ways in which individuals' attitudes about feminism mirror this anticollectivist, individualist trend.

Keywords: consumerism, individualism, postfeminism

The war between the sexes is over. We won okay? We won the second women started doing pole dancing for exercise.

—JACOB (*played by Ryan Gosling*) in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*¹

Introducing Post-feminist Anti-feminism

The era of "post-feminism" emerged in the 1990s and continues today. Post-feminism is distinguished by the depoliticization of feminist goals and an opposition to collective feminist action. A post-feminist perspective is grounded in the assumption that women's material needs have mostly been met and that a

feminist movement is no longer necessary. Post-feminist rhetoric often acknowledges the positive effects of feminism and incorporates some of the language of the feminist movement such as “empowerment” and “choice.” Ostensible empowerment in the marketplace through consumerism and in lifestyle choice has replaced the earlier political and intellectual work of feminism. Whereas feminism used to focus on women wanting to have control over their bodies, for instance in the area of reproductive choice, post-feminism utilizes “choice” to pick products for purchase. Whereas feminism used to focus on pay equality and discrimination in the workplace, post-feminism encourages women to focus on their private lives and consumer capacities as a means of self-expression and agency.² The media help undermine feminist objectives by placing the focus of women’s empowerment on *self*-transformation rather than *social* transformation. Post-feminism is assimilationist in that white, heterosexual, and middle-class women’s issues are generalized to all women.³ The assumption that women’s material needs have been met and they can now demonstrate empowerment through consumer choices illustrates the Western, middle-, and upper-middle class assumptions of post-feminism. Post-feminism is especially suited to the neoliberal politics popularized in the United States and United Kingdom in the 1980s. Neoliberalism is a system that attempts to dismantle the social welfare programs (e.g., government work programs, aid to farmers) that have been in place since the New Deal in the (p.2) United States, and it is characterized by a pro-business capitalism that supports the redistribution of resources upward without regard for the widening inequalities such a system produces.

The era of post-feminism corresponds to what has been referred to as the third wave of feminism (the first wave being roughly from the 1840s to the 1920s and the second wave roughly from the 1960s to the 1980s, peaking in the 1970s). Some feminist writers see a clear distinction between third-wave feminism and post-feminism, whereas others see them as the same—both as versions of anti-feminism. Those who distinguish the two describe third-wave feminism as an extension of the historical trajectory of first- and second-wave feminism to better accommodate contemporary political culture and the logic of women as consumer citizens. Two of the most well-known of the third-wave feminists, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, articulated third-wave feminism in their popular 2000 book, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*.⁴ Their stated goal was to widen the borders of feminism to include more contemporary manifestations.⁵ They argue that third-wave feminism is structured as a more diverse, inclusive, and integrated movement with the goal of diversifying its approach to activism and social change through social media and *zines* and different feminist subcultures such as *riot grrrl* culture popular in the 1990s. One important stated goal of third-wave feminism is to be explicitly inclusive in terms of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability, relative to the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (i.e., second wave).⁶ Third-wave

feminists, conscious of the white- and heterosexual-centered limitations of the second-wave movement, seek to include women who had been previously marginalized. Still other feminist scholars do not find utility in classifying the feminist movement into three waves, especially for Latina and African American feminism. For example, the 1980s was a vibrant period for feminists of color with the publication of now classic works such as Angela Davis's 1981 *Women, Race & Class*,⁷ bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* in 1984,⁸ Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* in 1984,⁹ and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981.¹⁰

This chapter explores the landscape of popular culture, politics, and psychology, emphasizing relatively recent moves away from feminist activism to individualism and consumerism where "self-empowerment" represents women's progress. First, post-feminism borrows the rhetoric of feminism with references to "choice" and "empowerment." But the post-feminist version of these terms is very different from what actual feminists mean. Second, post-feminism moves away from collective action, protest, and resistance—the cornerstone of all civil rights movements—to an individualism and consumerism ethic. Third, a hypersexualization of girls and women is key to post-feminism—now women can "choose" to be sexual objects. Finally, in addition to examining popular culture (p.3) and political illustrations of post-feminism, we examine recent psychological research on the ways in which women's attitudes about feminism mirror this anticollectivist, individualist trend. Psychology studies find that young adults are less likely than previous generations to believe that activism is necessary to improve women's status in society.

Empowerment, Choice, and Personal Responsibility

In her book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*, Angela McRobbie¹¹ describes a process in which feminism is acknowledged and then dismissed in the post-feminist era of the early 21st century. Post-feminist rhetoric recognizes the principles and accomplishments of feminism and incorporates them into a post-feminist discourse. Employing terms such as "empowerment" and "choice," these elements are refigured into an individualistic discourse, then deployed in a new guise, by media, popular culture, and politics, as a substitute for feminism. Feminism is utilized to explain and promote individual choice, and the success of feminism is cited as an argument for why further social change is unnecessary, and any negative outcome for women is their own fault.

Popular films such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and the popular television series and films in the *Sex and the City* franchise reflect this deployment of certain palatable elements of women's liberation, such as sexual freedom and economic independence. But the elements of feminism that would question the obsession with beauty and cosmetics, rampant consumerism, and hyperfemininity are ignored. McRobbie describes *Sex and the City's* Carrie

Bradshaw as displaying a “cloying girlie infantilism”¹² that undercuts any authority she might have as a writer for a reputable newspaper. U.S. films such as *The Ugly Truth* (2009) and *The Proposal* (2009) reflect additional elements of post-feminism. In *The Ugly Truth* Katherine Heigl plays a controlling, high-powered morning news TV producer who is forced to work with Gerard Butler, who plays a lewd and rude sexist tell-it-like-it-is relationship expert. In *The Proposal*, Sandra Bullock plays the controlling high-powered über-bitch executive who forces her earnest underling played by Ryan Reynolds to marry her so she can avoid deportation. In both films, we find that the main characters are independent career women—acknowledging the economic progress of women, thanks in part to the second wave of feminism. However, these professionally successful characters are portrayed as self-loathing, bossy, uptight, and utterly without personal lives. *What they need is a man*. Before they can get a man, they must experience a “mortifying comeuppance”¹³—a debasing punishment for their independent relationship-less lives. Under post-feminism, these modern shrews must be tamed. In *The (p.4) Ugly Truth*, the vulgar chauvinist Gerard Butler tames Katherine Heigl. In *The Proposal*, the decent Ryan Reynolds sweetens his boss, Sandra Bullock. Both women inevitably fall for their previously mismatched male leads. This form of backlash motivates not through fear but the promise of love. By making the right man the solution to the dilemmas of gender discrimination, these films make feminism old, tired, and laughable in the present, implying that even in the past feminism must have exaggerated problems or been a mistake altogether.¹⁴ These films convey that love between a woman and a man is real, natural, and unchanging—despite the acceptance of women in the workplace. The backlash against 1960s and 1970s feminism attempted to frighten women back into the home, accepting traditional gender roles, and identifying such roles as the only source of personal happiness. These films reflect a post-feminist backlash. Post-feminism recognizes that it is unlikely that women all together will be pushed out of the workplace and back into the home, yet these films function to distance women from feminism and convince them that their lives should revolve around the heterosexual family, even if greater independence and work outside the home are expected.¹⁵ While the women of *Sex and the City* experiment with transgressive sexuality, including same-sex relations, drag, and dominance/submission, they too eventually return to familiar and safe heterosexuality.¹⁶

What is absent in *post-feminism* is the feminist requirement that men be prepared to relinquish some of their privileges and advantages in work and in the home in order to achieve equality in the domestic sphere.¹⁷ So post-feminism is represented by a popular culture marked by an undoing or dismantling of feminism but that is not in favor of a total re-traditionalization. Instead, aspects of feminism are now common sense and, as such, a cohesive feminist movement is something women no longer need.¹⁸ Also absent in post-feminism is an understanding of dominant-group privilege and structural inequality. Post-

feminism reduces *women* to white, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual women. That is, in post-feminism the typical woman has a job with a salary that allows her to purchase consumer goods, she has a husband and family, and she does not experience discrimination. Post-feminism erases structural inequality in that any discrimination against women that does still exist is viewed as a singular case of mistreatment against individual women, and it is probably the women's own fault.

Post-feminist choice and empowerment rhetoric is found not only in pop culture and politics but also in individual women's thinking about their own lives. The internalization of the post-feminist rhetoric of personal choice is displayed in two interview studies with women. Joanne Baker¹⁹ interviewed Australian women from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds, and Emma Rich²⁰ interviewed white women from the United Kingdom about their perceived opportunities and their relationship to feminism. Participants in these studies assert that anything is possible, that **(p.5)** there are endless options for women today, and that striving for self-improvement will be rewarded in a meritocratic system. The young women Baker interviewed were optimistic that they could do anything, even those facing terrible odds due to early motherhood and lack of formal education.²¹ Although this optimism allows the imagination of a different future in which things can be better, it puts the onus solely on the shoulders of the individual—the state, politics, and any kind of collective action is irrelevant to improving people's lives. These narratives are indicative of post-feminism that draws on a notion of rational actors who can free themselves from restrictions if they simply have the motivation. This rationalization depoliticizes the inequitable social structures that have an impact on their lives.

These young women are in perfect sync with the rhetoric of neoliberalism in which opportunity is something of one's own making and failure one's own fault. In drawing on the language of individualism, these women are reluctant to associate with a group that would be seen as victims, since victimhood would undermine their carefully constructed sense of agency that is vital to their identity narratives. According to Rich's analysis, to view their circumstances through a feminist lens was to be associated with *disadvantage*, or to draw upon a position of *victim*, a pathetic female. Victimhood is strenuously avoided as it is associated with insufficient personal drive, a lack of personal responsibility for one's own life, and self-pity.²²

During the interviews, conversations about gender inequality are either absent²³ or dismissed by the women interviewed as a thing of the past, and those who complain about inequality are stigmatized by the interviewees as unfeminine.²⁴ A feminist analysis would rupture an imagined sense of self-determination so intimately tied to the discourse of individualism. Baker observes that neoliberal and post-feminist discourses have foreclosed any articulation of inequality or oppression in social relations, so instead the participants emphasize their sense

of agency and self-determination. Both groups of women articulate success in terms of individual responsibility. Opportunity and failure are something of one's own making.

However, the emphasis on personal responsibility means that challenges tend to be understood as psychological (as opposed to structural) and as manifestations of personal failings or inadequacies. Most notably, Baker found that among the young women, it was the *least* advantaged who distanced themselves from the specter of disadvantage. Even domestic violence is looked at in the context of a personal experience rather than as a phenomenon that is, to some degree, explained by structural circumstances and unequal power relations between women and men. The tendency to use individualizing discourse not only facilitates a misunderstanding of people's own actual circumstances, but it also forgoes empathy for others; sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination are simply (p.6) individual problems or are not problems at all. Thus, harm from men's violence against women and the difficulties of single parenthood have been individualized, thus effectively privatizing personal experience that is, in part, structurally produced and profoundly gendered.²⁵

Despite the supposed access to unprecedented choice, the findings emerging from these interviews suggest that the new possibilities for young women are still grounded in traditionally gendered and classed boundaries. The women interviewed seek stereotypical careers in altruistic and people-oriented occupations rather than male-dominated jobs.²⁶ They position themselves as autonomous individuals free to choose whatever occupation they desire, yet ultimately they prioritized the role of women as wives and mothers.²⁷ The young women's aspirations reflect cultural and historical limits, but like the women in popular culture, these young women account for their restricted vision in a post-feminist framework of presumed equality and personal choice. Rather than being confined by gender inequality and pressure to play out traditional roles, these women simply "choose" to be traditional.

The personal choice and empowerment discourse goes beyond women's career choices and takes a disturbing form in Katy Day and Tammy Keys'²⁸ analysis of "pro-eating-disorder" websites. These websites offer tips for girls and women for maintaining and hiding an eating disorder. Their analysis of the material from websites revealed that the practice of self-starvation or bingeing was often reframed as an empowering lifestyle choice as opposed to a pathology or the result of a beauty industry that creates, and then profits from, women's insecurities. Starving and bingeing is framed as an attempt to reclaim control over the female body and as nonconformity in what is described as a fat, gluttonous world. The women who post on these websites describe themselves as enlightened, even part of an elite group. For instance, one woman posts, "This is a place for the elite who, through personal determination in their ongoing quest for perfection, demonstrate daily that Ana [anorexia] is the ONLY way to

live.”²⁹ Day and Keys’ research demonstrates that destructive health behaviors such as anorexia are recoded by the girls and women as signaling empowerment and control. In this case, empowerment takes the form of unhealthy behavior rather than a feminist resistance to impossible beauty norms.

Consumerism, Individualism, but Not Activism

From the preceding discussion, we see that individualism and consumerism make collective action appear unnecessary, irrelevant, and obsolete. In this regard, post-feminism is consistent with the neoliberal corporatist³⁰ doctrine of Milton (p.7) Friedman and the Chicago School theory of economics. This corporatist agenda was embraced by Ronald Reagan and, to varying degrees, by every subsequent U.S. president. The corporatist doctrine seeks to privatize anything and everything. The goal is for a tiny government with huge transfers of wealth from public into private, for-profit, hands. In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein³¹ describes how U.S. presidential administrations beginning with Reagan in the 1980s began to sell off or outsource large, publicly owned entities such as water, electricity, highway management, and garbage collection to private companies. Likewise, in Britain under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the government privatized British Telecom, British Gas, British Airways, British Airport Authority, and British Steel. By the time George W. Bush was named president in 2000, many public schools began to be replaced by vouchered private charter schools. Many U.S. prisons became privatized and for-profit, now financially dependent on a constant stream of new inmates to keep beds filled. And by the time the U.S. invaded Iraq and Afghanistan in 2001 and 2003, even war was outsourced with a record number of for-hire mercenaries employed by companies such as *Blackwater*.³²

How does the move from public holdings to private relate to anti-feminism? Post-feminism is part of a corporatist and neoliberal political economy that encourages women to focus on their private lives and consumer capacities for self-expression and agency.³³ A central feature of neoliberalism is the implanting of market cultures across everyday life, the relentless pursuit of welfare “reform” (reducing help for the poor), and the encouragement of forms of consumer citizenship that are beneficial only to those who are already privileged. Undoing the antihierarchical struggles of social movements is also a priority within the discourse of neoliberalism. In a neoliberal context, there is no room for collective action. An attack on disadvantaged social groups is masked by the ostensibly nonracist and nonsexist language of self-esteem, empowerment, and personal responsibility. The post-feminist emphasis on consumerism divides women by class and by region. If empowerment for women is measured by purchasing power, those who can afford to consume and those who cannot will find little common ground and solidarity. Globally, there is little opportunity for building coalitions between the Western women who consume

products made in developing countries and the girls and women who make the products that Western women purchase.

The emphasis on individualism and consumerism says a woman can be whatever she wants to be: who she becomes is up to her and is disconnected from history and uninfluenced by social movements or the struggles of past generations. With women's progress in the workplace and marketplace there is a narrative of the *successful woman*. Women have as much or more education as men³⁴ and, as we will see in Chapter 4, employers can pay them less.³⁵ At the same time there is **(p.8)** an emphasis on girls and women as consumers. Companies draw on the language of "girl power" as if to bestow on their products a sense of dynamism, modernity, and innovation. As a consequence, girls are gender-differentiated and marketed to as consumers at younger and younger ages.³⁶

Magazines targeting girls such as *CosmoGIRL!* and *Teen Vogue* emphasize this individual-empowerment-through-consumption "feminism." In her analysis of teen girl magazines, Jessalynn Keller³⁷ finds a defanged feminism where feminism is fun, and is a celebration of individual agency. This kind of feminism comes with the promise that hard work and dedication will lead to success and an empowered life. The individualized version of feminism offered by these mainstream teen magazines may be more easily accepted by corporate, mainstream publications because the message coincides with the larger cultural narratives about hard work, success, and the "American Dream." This version of feminism avoids any criticism of capitalism and, as a result, fails to incorporate important analysis that was the cornerstone of feminist critique, such as criticism of the beauty industry, in favor of presenting topics in a fun, playful tone. This "fun-feminism" is problematic because male dominance, power, and privilege are not addressed, and the feminism presented is merely stylistic and not directed toward social change. Keller argues that while the individualistic expression of feminism is not inherently problematic, by itself, it offers girls a grossly limited understanding of contemporary power relations. It overlooks structural barriers such as sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism—factors that continue to impact girls' lives. Social change is rendered irrelevant, and personal change through consumerism is coded as empowerment.

A popular U.S. reality television show, *Undercover Boss*, captures this individualist worldview. The show depicts corporate CEOs who go undercover in disguise and work within their own organization. Each episode follows a specific format. The CEO, introduced as a new employee, gets to know a handful of workers in the organization, and learns of their struggles to balance work and family obligations, pay their way through part-time college, and be loyal to the company. This witnessing of the workers' tribulations in many cases brings tears to the eyes of the CEO and each episode culminates in the revelation that the new employee is actually the boss. The CEO provides gifts mostly in the form of money to the needy workers. For instance, one employee reports earlier in the

episode that she hasn't been able to take a vacation with her family in years, and so the CEO pays for a family vacation. Another employee has kids but cannot afford college for them, so the CEO contributes \$20,000 for a college fund for this employee's children. There are a few instances of more structural changes to accommodate workers, such as giving back a 10% wage cut the workers accepted when two companies merged, or adding smoking cessation to the employee (p.9) medical plan so anyone in the company who wants to quit smoking will get help. By and large, however, the changes in the form of generous offerings made by the newly raised consciousness of the CEO are specific to three or four individual workers, keeping the struggles of all the other workers in the company (and in corporatized America) unchanged.

Even the most obvious structural racial inequality gets an individualized spin in this individualist era. Keffrelyn Brown and Anthony Brown³⁸ analyzed the depictions of slavery in ten popular fifth and eighth grade social studies textbooks. They found that even something undeniably systemic and structural—U.S. slavery—was framed in individualized terms. The texts failed to show how racial violence operated systematically to oppress African Americans' opportunities and social mobility in the United States. The textbooks do not present the slave trade and slavery as based in our fundamental institutions such as law and religion. Rather, the perpetrators of violence against enslaved African Americans are falsely portrayed as individual actors, or "bad men" who were deviant and not necessarily a reflection of the larger social, economic, and political structures. When discussing resistance to racial violence, stories focused again on individual, isolated efforts that concealed the organized and systematic ways that enslaved Americans and free blacks acted against their social condition. These individualized (and inaccurate) depictions of slavery and resistance prevent students from understanding the structural and institutional nature of racism.³⁹ Instead, students may come to view racial violence as isolated events in the past that were done by a few bad people and that only affected the individuals directly involved. Students are led to believe that present day treatment of blacks couldn't have anything to do with the legacy of structural racism rooted in slavery centuries ago.

We see a trend toward individualism in the psychological literature on *narcissism*—characterized by self-absorption, inflated ego, entitlement, and disregard for others. In her work on cultural and historic trends in narcissism, Jean Twenge finds generational differences, arguing that narcissism has increased over the last 30 years.⁴⁰ Younger people are more narcissistic than older people and young people score higher on individual traits and lower on communal and expressive traits. Interestingly, women have become more instrumental (individualistic and agentic), making them adaptive to the workplace and education, although men have not become more communal and expressive.⁴¹ Even lyrics to popular songs demonstrate a change toward individualism. An analysis of popular songs in the United States from 1980 to

2007 found an increase in words related to a focus on *the self*. Specifically, songs showed changes toward more first-person singular pronouns (*I, me, mine*) and fewer firstperson plural pronouns (*we, us, our*) over time.⁴² **(p.10)**

Shelly Budgeon⁴³ finds this highly individualist focus in her interviews with young women. She interviewed 33 young women in the United Kingdom about the women's movement and gender inequality. The suggestion that their choices and opportunities might be limited by external factors was met with a strong expression of individualism. Joanne Baker's⁴⁴ interviews with young Australian women described earlier also find young women articulating their lives through an individualist lens. The ideology of neoliberalism intensifies this entrenchment of a selfhood that is individuated and that the economic and social world can be best understood as constituted of self-directed, self-sufficient individual behavior that is informed by rational choice in the pursuit of self-interest. These young women's emphasis on individual improvement is unlikely to facilitate an openness to feminism or an orientation toward collective action for social change. Even more troubling, in addition to the tendency to deny one's own difficulties, this "can-do" neoliberal discourse also appears to foreclose voicing compassion for others experiencing oppression or challenging circumstances and the recognition of how social structures act on individuals. Complementing these interviews, a recent meta-analysis of 72 studies on empathy found a decrease in empathy and perspective-taking among American college students from 1979 to 2009.⁴⁵ Therefore, the obligation to demonstrate plucky individualism has consequences that extend beyond individual psychological processes, impacting broader social consequences with the lack of regard for others' plights.

A main feature of post-feminism is the acknowledgment that choices young women have today are due in large part to the women's liberation movement before them. However, the legacy of feminism is not recognized by some of the very women who benefit from it today and who believe they have choices. That they do not recognize the role of feminism in their freedoms is an indication of the extent to which feminism in the early 21st century is not a marginalized discourse but has become an integral part of young women's lives. In order to demonstrate the empowerment and success expected of them, women in this post-feminist individualist culture seemingly need to dissociate themselves from feminism: precisely *because* young women feel empowered, they believe they no longer need feminism.⁴⁶

Unlike the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, there is little *movement* in post-feminism. A key theme of this chapter is the post-feminist focus on *self*-transformation rather than *structural* transformation, the core assumption being that any kind of collective action is unnecessary, repellent, and, as demonstrated in the previous section, shows weakness.⁴⁷ Post-feminism offers a defanged feminism, offering lifestyle and an assertive can-do attitude in place of

the hard political and intellectual work that feminists have done. Angela McRobbie⁴⁸ **(p.11)** describes a process she calls *disarticulation*, the force that devalues, negates, and makes unthinkable the possibility of coming together, on the widely promoted assumption that there is no longer any need for such actions. Disarticulation operates through the widespread dissemination of values that typecast feminism as having been fueled by anger and hostility toward men (a topic we address in Chapter 3). Feminist activists are constructed as embittered, unfeminine, and repugnant. Young women are discouraged from getting involved in controversial or confrontational political areas (particularly issues such as sex work or pornography) for fear of offending men and being branded a feminist. This reluctance results in the stifling of dissent, debate, and solidarity among women.⁴⁹

A study by Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell⁵⁰ dissects the stereotype of the unattractive feminist activist. Edley and Wetherell examined men's constructions of feminists and feminism in their interviews with U.K. men ranging from age 17 to 64 from a variety of class and ethnic backgrounds. They found two competing versions of feminists and feminism. The first, the liberal feminist, was frequently presented as a woman simply wanting equality. The second version of feminist was a hyperbolic theatrical representation, with the men providing information about her physical appearance, sexual orientation, and attitudes toward men. The two versions of feminists worked in a "Jekyll and Hyde" fashion. Like Jekyll, feminists and feminism in the first version have a nonthreatening, sane, and rational character. Feminist aspirations for gender equality were reported as simple, ordinary, reasonable matters of fact. Dr. Jekyll is the ordinary woman who simply wants equality. In stark contrast, there is Ms. Hyde, the unfeminine feminist and extreme political activist. A person should be in favor of equality (Jekyll) but not be fanatical about it (Hyde). We should all want equality, but not too ardently. The men believed that change is slow and requires patience. Extremists therefore are trying to change the course of history. They are too pushy. The men interviewed by Edley and Wetherell seemed to believe that the improvement of women's position in Western society has occurred regardless of the efforts of feminists. Their belief is that we are getting there, slowly but surely, and women should be patient and tolerant of current inequalities. The most readily available ways of talking (and thinking) about feminists encourages men (and perhaps women) to identify with a definition of feminism that is patient, moderate, and stripped of any radical potential.⁵¹

Male dominance is also partly achieved through attempts to obscure women's resistance by characterizing collective female resistance as negative and unfeminine, implying that feminists are unattractive to men. Once such a negative category is in place, feminism can be used as an accusation, and a means of silencing assertive women.⁵² No reasonable woman would want to identify as a feminist as long as the extremist caricature exists. **(p.12)**

Indeed, recent empirical work on attitudes about feminism finds further evidence for this anticollectivist trend. Young adults in the 21st century are less likely than previous generations to believe that collective action is necessary to improve women's status in society. Also, young women are reluctant to identify as feminists if they believe feminists are activists.⁵³ In Chapter 6, we address the question of whether or not a feminist identity is good for women in terms of psychological and social health. We will see that there are distinct differences between women who call themselves feminists and those who agree with the principles of feminism but do not label themselves as feminists. Women who self-label as feminists, as opposed to women who merely believe in the principles of feminism, are more likely to believe that gender inequality exists and that women (and men) must work together to end sexism. Self-labeled feminists are more likely to see beyond the individualist rhetoric of post-feminism and recognize the need for societal change.⁵⁴ Consequently, feminists need to remain focused on raising women's awareness of continued gender inequity in order to motivate young women to understand that work still needs to be done.

Post-feminist Sexualization

In her book, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work Is Done*, media critic Susan Douglas⁵⁵ defines and distinguishes embedded feminism and enlightened sexism. *Embedded feminism* is the assumption that women's achievements are now simply part of the media landscape. Feminism is no longer marginal, outside of the media, as it was in, say, the 1960s. For instance, we see women on television as police captains, doctors, and lawyers. *Enlightened sexism* takes the gains of the women's movement as a given, and then uses those gains to resurrect retrograde images of girls and women as sexual objects still defined by their appearance. Now that women have it all, they should focus their energy on their true power—their bodies, attire, and sexuality—power that is fun, power that will not alienate men. Embedded feminism and enlightened sexism serve to reinforce each other: they both exaggerate women's gains and accomplishments and render feminism obsolete.⁵⁶

Post-feminist empowerment and choice rhetoric discussed earlier tells women they can now *choose* to be sexualized and objectified, and they can disregard their second-wave feminist grandmothers who would cringe in disapproval. This trend is seen in the increased promotion and popularity of pole-dancing among suburban middle class women as exercise and at-home entertainment for their male partners. The popularity in the United States of the *Pussy Cat Dolls* in the early 2000s, the franchise dance troupe with a rotating cast made up of young women with sexually explicit dance routines, also reflects this diversion from the **(p.13)** politics of feminism. Feminism is evoked and claimed regarding sexual freedom, but then is quickly dismissed with relief—no more feminist nagging about the sexual objectification of women. In post-feminism it is permissible once again to enjoy the scantily clad bodies of women.⁵⁷ Angela McRobbie also

notes the expansion of wedding culture. The prominence of wedding culture, apart from contributing to the expansion of consumer culture, rides on this tidal wave of celebratory post-feminism, as though to say, thank goodness, girls can be girls again, the feminist Debbie Downers of the 1960s and 1970s are long gone.⁵⁸

An implicit assumption of post-feminism is that women's status has improved. Progress has been slow perhaps, but portrayals of women in popular culture and real-world opportunities for women have progressed over the last several decades. To be sure, in some domains things have gotten better for girls and women. However, there is one area that has gotten startlingly worse in the last two decades: the sexualization and objectification of girls and women in mass media. John Mager and James Helgeson⁵⁹ examined 50 years of advertising images of women and men in major magazines. Common sense might predict that portrayals of women in print ads have gotten better. In some ways they have. For instance, early ads depicted women in the home happy to be passively domestic. More recent ads do not show such traditional images. Ads today, however, still show women as dependent on men and still in need of men's protection, such as those in previous decades. Men today are still more likely to be shown in authoritative, superior, and more powerful positions and women are in more deferential positions to men.⁶⁰ Compared to men, women are also more likely to be positioned in weakened psychological states, looking away, disoriented, and even looking dead or passed out—and these depictions have actually *increased* over the 50-year period analyzed by Mager and Helgeson.⁶¹ Open a fashion magazine and you can find print ads depicting dead women from Marc Jacobs, Gucci, Lanvin, Jimmy Choo, and Louis Vuitton, and ads depicting gang rape by Calvin Klein, Dolce & Gabbana, and Tom Ford. These depictions are *more* prevalent today. Shock value in ads is used to break through the commercial clutter of competing ads and comes in many forms. One major strategy is to feature women's sexual objectification. Sadly, when contemporary women's own attitudes about sexual objectification in advertisements have been analyzed we find women are more accepting of and less offended by sexually objectified images of women than they were 10 or 20 years ago. We have become habituated to these images. They have become normalized. Furthermore, women report that an ad that demeans women would not influence whether or not they purchased the particular product.⁶² Thus, advertising has fully embraced this post-feminist permission to objectify women and to some extent women in the early 21st century have embraced this too. **(p.14)**

Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s fought for, among other things, control over their bodies—the right to control their reproduction, the right to love who they want, the right to extricate themselves from abusive relationships. The women's liberation movement fought for the release of women from conventional morality around sex, which had confined them to either idealized chastity on the one hand or contemptible promiscuity on the other. Feminism allowed for the

possibility of women engaging in sex for their own pleasure rather than for the two previously allowed reasons for sex: to reproduce or to please a husband. In the context of post-feminism, an era in which feminism is taken into account but then swiftly dismissed and debased, women's sexual freedom manifests in porn culture and the hypersexualization of women and girls. The sexually affirming woman of the 1960s and 1970s has turned into a sexually objectified woman of post-feminism. Embedded feminism, enlightened sexism, and the lack of a collective and cohesive women's liberation movement all contribute to this climate.

Post-feminism and the Domestication of Pornography

A major hallmark of post-feminism is the post-feminist "permission" to sexualize and objectify women—often by women themselves. In her book, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, Natasha Walters⁶³ studies the rise of hypersexual culture. Far from giving a full range of women's freedom and potential, the new hypersexual culture redefines women's success through a narrow framework of sexual allure: *Hotness*. Once on the margins of society, pole dancing is articulated as liberating for women. Free yourself and feel empowered. And who wouldn't want to wear high heels as they exercise? The narrowing of what it means to be sexy arises from the way that the sex industry has become more pervasive and more generally acceptable. In her book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, Ariel Levy⁶⁴ describes women's embrace of porn culture, where the emphasis is on hotness and being sexy but not necessarily on being *sexual*. The distinction between sexy and sexual is important because it's the difference between women being the *subject* of their sexuality versus women being *objects* of someone else's desire. Levy writes that the intertwining of women embracing their own sexual objectification and the post-feminist culture of consumption puts sexual desire and arousal in the background, and *looking* hot and *looking* sexy in the foreground. Therefore, post-feminist hypersexuality has little to do with women feeling empowered to be in charge of their sexual desire, to explore passion, to expect sexual fulfillment, and more to do with looking like porn stars. Consistent with the principles of post-feminism, all this happens in the context of supposed free choice. **(p.15)**

Let's consider just a few recent and current trends that mark the mainstreaming of pornography and the hypersexualization of women in popular culture. Once a widespread but sequestered industry, pornography is now abundant and permeates the cultural space.⁶⁵ This change is due in large part to the increased access to online pornography. That one can access a limitless range of pornography with just a few mouse taps means that it's accessible to anyone with a computer or phone. A person used to slink into a seedy theater, bookstore, or club—now anyone can access hardcore pornography at home or work or even while commuting. Easy accessibility goes a long way to mainstreaming pornography, but the mainstreaming of pornography isn't the only effect of Internet access to porn. A recent study found that newer

pornographic media feature more violence against women than do older ones. Internet-based pornography is more likely to show sexual violence as nonconsensual with men victimizing women compared to magazine and video pornography.⁶⁶ That Internet porn contains more violence against women is significant because it is violent pornography, not pornography in general, that has been linked to men's aggression against women. In a classic experiment, Edward Donnerstein⁶⁷ showed men a neutral, erotic, or aggressive-erotic film. Compared to the other films, exposure to the aggressive-erotic film led men to be aggressive toward both women and men, and especially more aggressive toward women.

Working in the sex industry used to signal the death of a mainstream career, but work in pornography is now seen as a stepping-stone to a more legitimate career in Hollywood. The mainstreaming of porn can be seen in the intertwining of pornography and music videos. Pornographic film directors now can be found directing mainstream music videos and former porn stars can be found starring in them.⁶⁸ *Girls Next Door*—a reality TV show that debuted in 2005 on the *E!* network about *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner's three *Playboy* bunny girlfriends—was a mainstream hit that spawned spinoff shows for two of the bunnies, *Holly's World* and *Kendra*. Sixteen-year-old teen actor-singer Miley Cyrus performed a pole dance at the 2009 Teen Choice Awards.⁶⁹ On a 2012 episode of MTV's *Pauly D Project* Britney Spears performs a lap dance for *Jersey Shore* reality star Paul "Pauly D" DelVecchio.⁷⁰ These examples illustrate the conventionalization of the previously marginal and seamy porn industry.

Another noted consequence of the mainstreaming of pornography is the increase in women who wax or shave their pubic hair. The complete removal of *all* pubic hair—not just waxing the "bikini line"—has become normalized in recent years. Feminist writer Caitlin Moran argues that the increase in pubic hair removal coincides with the same trend in pornography. She writes, "Hollywood waxing is now total industry standard. Watch any porn made after say, 1988, and it's all hairless down there: close-ups are like watching Daddy Warbucks, with no (p. 16) eyes, eating a very large, fidgety sausage."⁷¹ Moran believes pubic hair is removed in hardcore pornography to enable viewers to see more in penetrative shots of intercourse. How does pubic hair removal become an internalized value for young women today? Moran argues that "hard-core pornography is now the primary form of sex education in the Western world. This is where teenage boys and girls are 'learning' what to do to each other, and what to expect when they take each other's clothes off."⁷² This phenomenon is problematic for several reasons. First, the pubic region has become yet another part of a woman's natural body—in addition to her legs and underarms—that needs to be altered in order to be viewed as attractive and sexually desirable. Second, women seem to time their waxing, shaving, and plucking according to when they may have sex and vice versa, rather than timing sex according to when they are least likely to become pregnant, or according to when they actually desire to have intercourse.

Third, pubic waxing is another consumer product/service they must purchase, adding to the bloated consumer beauty industry. Fourth, shaving pubic areas increases the likelihood of infections, including sexually-transmitted diseases.⁷³ Finally, that grown women's pubic area is modified to look like a prepubescent girls' area juvenilizes women, sexualizes young girls, and blurs the difference between the two.

Confusing Sexual Objectification with Empowerment

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s emphasized women's control over their own bodies and their own sexuality, while simultaneously critiquing the culture's sexual objectification of women in the form of Miss America pageants or *Penthouse Pets*. Drawing on the emphasis on sexual empowerment of the 1960s and 1970s, the third-wave feminism of the mid-1990s supposedly ushered in a nonjudgmental approach to sexuality. Given the forces of neoliberal consumerism and individualism, however, *women's liberation* seems to have been reduced to *sexual liberation* and in this context *sexual liberation* has come to mean *sexual self-objectification*. In other words, the post-feminist message is that being a sexual object is now a source of power.⁷⁴ The result is that young women in the United States are encouraged by marketers, filmmakers, pornographers, and magazine publishers to participate in their own objectification. Instead of demanding the right to be seen as human beings, many of today's girls and women are cooperating with the old-fashioned notion of being seen as sex objects. It's the one kind of power that is sanctioned for women: the power to look hot and to draw attention to your hotness; the kind of power that doesn't threaten *real* power—political, economic, and cultural power. The use of the word *empowerment* is a strange distortion of what the term once meant to feminists. When feminists talked about empowerment in the past it was not in reference to a young woman in a thong **(p.17)** twirling around a pole,⁷⁵ wearing T-shirts that say "unbelievable knockers,"⁷⁶ or wearing sweat pants with the word "juicy" on the butt. The clothing brand *Juicy Couture* prints bags and laptop sleeves that say "Fun is back."⁷⁷ Culturally, and assisted by such accouterments, girls and women can present themselves as fun and hip and distance themselves from their outdated, uptight, feminist grandmothers.

The hypersexualized marketplace is reinforcing certain behavior (i.e., the hot young woman) and punishing other behavior (i.e., a woman perceived as an uptight feminist), making it hard for many young women to find the space for alternative views of female sexuality and other ways for women to feel empowered. The smoke-and-mirrors language of choice and empowerment prevents people from seeing just how limiting such so-called choices can be.⁷⁸ *It's their choice and we shouldn't judge*. So, it's stodgy old second-wave feminists who are judging these women. Feminists are uptight and old fashioned, or worse, feminists are the *oppressors* in a post-feminist hypersexual context.

One of the most ironic domains displaying the hypersexualization, or at least *hyper-feminization*, of women may be one of the more paradoxical ones—women's sports. To acquire sponsors and appear in sports magazines, while not scaring off fans (particularly men), women athletes are pressured to present themselves as objects of femininity and obedience to traditional gender roles. Although the fact of women in sports challenges the historical and traditional association between masculinity and sport, media representations of women athletes sadly emphasize gender difference through a focus on the femininity of the athlete rather than her athletic strengths. This process of feminization constructs differences between women and men athletes and undermines challenges to the gender order.⁷⁹ Women's athleticism is rendered unthreatening and feminine whereas men's athleticism is the real deal—masculine and strong. Some women professional athletes wear full make up during competition, bows in their hair, long fingernails, and other markers of femininity when they engage in the masculine activity of sports. Indeed many well-known professional and Olympic athletes have posed for *Playboy* magazine, including Amanda Beard (swimming), Gabrielle Reece (volleyball), Mia St. John (taekwondo/boxing), and Chyna (World Wrestling Entertainment).

The process of feminizing the professional woman athlete tends to occur for white women athletes more readily than black women. Because African American women have been historically denied access to full-time homemaking and deprived of sexual protection, black womanhood has not been tied in the same way as white womanhood to activities and attributes defined as distinctive and different from masculine attributes. Therefore, African American women historically have been located outside dominant culture's definition of **(p.18)** conventional (white) femininity. Victoria Carty argues that African American women athletes are seen as more conventionally athletic (i.e., masculine) than white women because black women's strength does not threaten traditional notions of beauty and femininity (coded as white) in the same way that white women's strength does. Therefore, media coverage of black women athletes is more about their athletic accomplishments compared to coverage of white women. For instance, Serena and Venus Williams have been described as "huge," "heavyweight fighter," "pummeling," and "masculine." African American women athletes are portrayed as lacking those features attributed to the norm of white heterosexual femininity. Carty argues that African American women athletes "may enjoy a greater expansion of gender roles and trespass more freely across the boundaries of traditional standards of femininity, because they have never been fully included in the stringent ideals of femininity and heterosexuality to begin with."⁸⁰

The hypersexualization of women in post-feminism is indeed *raced* and *classed*. The mainstreaming of the sex industry made popular "Pimp and Ho" parties in the past two decades, as well as the domestication of the term "pimp" as a noun and verb. The actual pimp and prostitute relationship, a fundamentally

exploitative relationship involving a man profiting from the use and abuse of women's bodies, is lost when we pretend these terms and roles are simply playful (and supposedly sexy). "Pimp" and "ho" are also racialized images, in contemporary media representations and with historical roots in the construction of African American men as hypersexual predators and African American women as temptresses with poor sexual morals.⁸¹ When white men and women perform these roles, whether or not they literally don blackface or afro wigs, they are play-acting race along with gender and sexuality. In addition, playing with the "pimp and ho" dynamic has historical reverberations for African Americans about which white people can be oblivious. It's one thing for an economically privileged white woman to dress scantily and perform the role of "ho" for a party, it's another for women of color or working class women to be culturally cast as whores.⁸² African American women's bodies have been sexualized and sexually abused since slavery. The image of African American women as inherently sexual and immoral functioned to justify their sexual assault by slaveholders, making the rape of a black woman no crime, literally. A 19th-century legal treatise, for example, explicitly blames interracial sex on "the *want of chastity* in the female slaves, and a *corresponding* immorality in the white males."⁸³ An 1859 Mississippi ruling declared that "[t]he crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves," because "their intercourse is promiscuous."⁸⁴ The legacies of such policies and practices continue to circulate in contemporary law and culture. In this context, for African American women, wearing revealing clothing, engaging in public displays of affection, and even **(p.19)** wearing makeup can be seen as a confirmation of black women's promiscuity and lewdness.⁸⁵

The mainstreaming of the sex industry has coincided with a point in history where there is less social and economic mobility than in previous generations.⁸⁶ No wonder then if the ideal that the sex industry pushes—that status can be won by any woman if she is prepared to flaunt her body—is now finding fertile ground among many young women who would never imagine a career in, say, politics.

Finally, the use of sexual attractiveness to gain status translates feminism into an act of using one's body as an object to obtain a specific type of attention, as opposed to a political movement that seeks gender equality and social justice at the structural and institutional level. Some individual women might think these "choices" work for them, but they are not necessarily good for women in general (and they might not, in fact, "work" for them, even as individuals). Post-feminists have overlooked the fact that men do not have to rely on such strategies because institutions such as education, mass media, and politics—historically and currently—privilege men and marginalize women, as we will see throughout this book. Thus, in post-feminism the structural arrangements that create and maintain sexism tend to go unacknowledged.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored post-feminism marked by the shift from feminism as a collective movement for women's liberation to superficial empowerment of the individual and her choices. In post-feminism, feminist goals are depoliticized and collective action is rendered irrelevant and unnecessary. In post-feminism, feminism is taken into account and is incorporated into political and institutional life but only as much as it allows a narrow self-empowerment. As Angela McRobbie⁸⁷ argues, there is a kind of exchange, and a process of displacement and substitution: Young women are offered equality in name, concretized in education and employment, and through membership in consumer culture and the public sphere—in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer.⁸⁸ In this neoliberal corporatist context, sexual power and purchasing power are presented as more gratifying and empowering than institutional, political or economic power.⁸⁹ Post-feminism is about the individual woman—personal choice, individual expression, and individual career success—and no recognition of the need for a united and collective social movement to liberate all women and enact structural change.⁹⁰ The language of individualism, choice, and empowerment in this consumerist context functions to tell women that a feminist movement is unnecessary, passé, and unattractive. Certainly women have choices but these **(p.20)** choices occur in a limited context. Women are being disempowered through the rhetoric of empowerment they are offered as substitutes for feminism.⁹¹

Post-feminism is integral to a neoliberal framework because it undercuts feminism and doesn't threaten what neoliberals hold dear—profitability, privatization, and individualism. These strategies masquerade as common sense.⁹² Post-feminism is a politics not of resistance or transformation, but of capitulation: to patriarchy, to neoliberalism, and to corporate control over public issues that affect us all.⁹³ Neoliberalism privileges private, corporate solutions to social problems and tends to marginalize critiques of oppression (racism and classism, as well as sexism) as subordinating practices—those who critique the system of inequality, we are told, focus too much on victimhood rather than on individual effort.⁹⁴

The depoliticized notion that feminism is anything a woman says it is refigures the Women's Liberation Movement into a milder "women's movement" minus "liberation" (and even minus "movement"). Abandoning the analysis of structural inequality, post-feminism masks the systemic forces that continue to oppress women and undercuts the possible strategic weight of politicized feminist collectivities.⁹⁵

This post-feminist environment makes unlikely the forging of alliances between Western and non-Western women. The sexual and consumer freedoms of some in the West now actively pitches them against the gender arrangements of other cultures.⁹⁶ Women in the West are encouraged to demonstrate their

empowerment through rampant consumerism. Who is likely to make the products that these women purchase? Women in the developing world work in sweatshops for ever lower pay with each passing decade. In November 2012 a fire at a garment factory in Bangladesh killed more than 100 workers, mostly young women. The sweatshop made clothing for Wal-Mart, Disney, Sears, and other retailers.⁹⁷ Only five months later on April 24, 2013 another factory in Bangladesh that made clothing for U.S. and European companies collapsed, killing more than 1,000 sweatshop workers. Apparel companies are attracted to countries such as China and Bangladesh because the young women workers can be paid as low as 14 cents an hour and can be forced to work 14 hour days often 7 days a week.⁹⁸ If, as post-feminism dictates, empowerment is individual, not collective, the links between women globally is obscured and the potential for solidarity among women is foreclosed.

The trends of post-feminism emerging in the last two decades, in conjunction with more recent events such as the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, work in concert to limit and confine the range of possible identities and roles for women. The next chapter addresses the effect of 9/11 on gender roles, and a later chapter addresses women who resist the restricted roles of women provided by post-feminism and 9/11. **(p.21)**

Because of its tarnished reputation, *Blackwater* changed its name to *Xe Services*, and then changed its name again to *Academi*.

This description reflects Goffman's advertisement category called, "Ritualization of Subordination." See: Goffman, E. (1976). *Gender advertisements*. New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks.

I'm describing Goffman's "Licensed Withdrawal." See: Goffman, E. (1976). *Gender advertisements*. New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks.

Juicy Butt

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Fun is back.

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