Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of “Choice”

R. Claire Snyder-Hall

How should feminist theorists respond when women who claim to be feminists make “choices” that seemingly prop up patriarchy, like posing for Playboy, eroticizing male dominance, or advocating wifely submission? This article argues that the conflict between the quest for gender equality and the desire for sexual pleasure has long been a challenge for feminism. In fact, the second-wave of the American feminist movement split over issues related to sexuality. Feminists found themselves on opposite sides of a series of contentious debates about issues such as pornography, sex work, and heterosexuality, with one side seeing evidence of gender oppression and the other opportunities for sexual pleasure and empowerment. Since the mid-1990s, however, a third wave of feminism has developed that seeks to reunite the ideals of gender equality and sexual freedom. Inclusive, pluralistic, and non-judgmental, third-wave feminism respects the right of women to decide for themselves how to negotiate the often contradictory desires for both gender equality and sexual pleasure. While this approach is sometimes caricatured as uncritically endorsing whatever a woman chooses to do as feminist, this essay argues that third-wave feminism actually exhibits not a thoughtless endorsement of “choice,” but rather a deep respect for pluralism and self-determination.

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What’s Wrong with “Choice”?

This symposium focuses on debates surrounding what Linda Hirshman has termed “choice feminism”—the idea that feminism should simply give women choices and not pass judgment on what they choose. While the term “choice feminism” may not have made it into common or scholarly parlance, the concept encapsulates widespread assumptions about what contemporary feminism should be. It forms a key part of American feminism as it has developed in the third wave. For example, Naomi Wolf criticizes second-wave feminism for being “judgmental” and praises third-wave feminism as more inclusive and pluralistic.
feminism for being “tolerant of other women’s choices about sexuality and appearance,” such as the choice to wear lipstick and heels. Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman criticize the “white, middle-class perspective . . . of [second-wave] academic feminism” for criticizing and rejecting the “life choices” that their mothers made, like staying with alcoholic husbands or wearing the veil. Susan Muaddi Darraj articulates a definition of feminism often heard in women’s studies classes, when she asks, “wasn’t feminism supposed to be about making my own choices?” While media coverage of choice feminism has tended to focus on debates about stay-at-home mothers, my discussion focuses on another set of thorny issues: how “choice feminism” responds to women who choose to engage in sex work, turn themselves into sexual objects, or eroticize male dominance.

Issues of sexuality need to be understood in the context of the longstanding tension within the feminist movement between the sometimes contradictory principles of gender equality and sexual liberation. Lori Marso argues that all women have to deal with what she calls the “demands of femininity”—women’s socially constructed desires, which include both sexual desire and internalized beliefs about gender identity and roles. Even women who embrace feminism, she argues, often find their attempts to achieve liberty and equality stymied by their own feminine attraction to things that bolster patriarchy, as well as by the dominant gender norms imposed on them. As Marso puts it, “what women are taught to desire also denies them their freedom. The very substance of what makes a woman feminine is what holds her in bondage.”

In some respects, feminism can be viewed precisely as the conscious struggle with the “demands of femininity.” For third-wavers, feminism requires not a particular set of choices, but rather acting with a “feminist consciousness,” defined as “knowledge of what one is doing and why one is doing it.” While Marso’s work focuses on feminists who actively resist the “demands of femininity,” I am more interested in feminists who embrace and enjoy femininity, while also struggling for gender equality. While critics of “choice feminism” rightly problematize some of the term’s implications, the concept itself entails a commitment to three important principles essential to feminism—pluralism, self-determination, and nonjudgmentalness.

The substantive content of choice feminism, I argue, presents a compelling vision, yet the phrase “choice feminism” remains problematic for a number of reasons and should be replaced with the term “third-wave feminism.” First, the term “choice” trivializes what are often hard decisions. Women who make traditional or seemingly problematic “choices” are not necessarily taking the “easy way out of the dilemmas of politicizing the personal,” as Ferguson suggests. Just looking at the final choice that was made tells us nothing about how much a woman actually struggled to balance competing imperatives, such as gender equality and sexual pleasure.

Second, calling the decisions women make “choices” conflates decisions made because of the obligations of religious faith (veiling), the grim realities of economic necessity (staying with an alcoholic husband), or the preconditions necessary for sexual arousal (traditional sex roles) with seemingly elective options like posing for Playboy or wearing lipstick and heels. At the same time, however, some “choices” that appear whimsical to outsiders might actually be driven by a woman’s deep-seated sexual desires (for exhibitionism or submission) or need to express her gender identity (as feminine).

Finally, the rhetoric of “choice” focuses attention on the individual choice-maker and so takes the focus off the ways in which women’s choices are often overdetermined by societal structures and cultural traditions. This is an important point because feminism is fundamentally about transforming patriarchal culture and society. Women should not have to choose between work and motherhood, respect and sexual pleasure. Feminism requires expanding the options available to women, so they can be truly self-determining, and the rhetoric of “choice” obscures that point.

That said, I argue that the substantive position represented by “choice feminism” is worth defending. By contextualizing “choice feminism” within the larger movement of third-wave feminism, I hope to justify its content, while avoiding the problematic implications of the “choice” terminology. The contention that “feminism” was supposed to be about making my own choices” may sound trite, but it speaks to the issue of self-determination that forms the foundation of feminism. The third-wave version of “choice feminism” I am advocating views freedom not as simply “the capacity to make individual choices” but rather as the ability to determine your own life path. At the same time, however, just because coercive forces exist and many of our decisions are not the product of perfectly “free choice,” whatever that is, that does not mean that women’s decisions about how to live their lives should not be respected.

Second-Wave Feminism and Its Demise

Women’s right to self-determination forms a core value for feminism. In The Feminine Mystique (1963), Friedan argued that the human being has an essential desire to exercise self-determination. “This ‘will to power,’ self-assertion, ‘dominance,’ or ‘autonomy,’ as it is variously called . . . is the individual affirming his existence and his potentialities as a being in his own right; it is ‘the courage to be an individual.” Due to the cultural norms of femininity at the time, however, women were denied the opportunity to self-determine and were reduced to being their husbands’ helpmates. Friedan insisted that, contrary to popular belief, gender equality would not erode women’s femininity, happiness, or sexual fulfillment.

256 Perspectives on Politics
threatening sexual pleasure, she argued, gender equality stood as its precondition.

While Friedan viewed the "choice between femaleness and humanness" as a false dichotomy, the tension between the two ideals quickly came to the fore with the onset of radical feminism, which focused attention more specifically on the "private sphere." Radical feminism aimed not simply to provide women with equal opportunities within existing society but to transform the entire multifaceted sex/gender system that advantaged men at the expense of women. Proclaiming "the personal is political," radical feminists presented "provocative critiques of the family, marriage, love, normative heterosexuality, and rape," the lynchpins of male dominance.16

Coming from the New Left and inspired by Marxist forms of analysis, radical feminists viewed society as structured by a sex/class system and assumed that because of their position in the patriarchal order women share a common experience of oppression that could become the basis for solidarity.17 The process of consciousness-raising brought women together to talk about their experiences, and through mutual sharing, they came to understand that what they thought were merely personal problems were actually politically overdetermined. Consciousness-raising asked women to examine how their own lived experiences contradicted the dominant ideology and to recognize the ways in which internalized societal norms keep them complicit in their own oppression.

With the private sphere on the table for political discussion, sexuality became a subject of radical analysis and sexual self-determination an explicit feminist goal. Articles like Anne Koedt's "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (1970) challenged the androcentric assumptions of Freudian psychoanalysis, and the popular book Our Bodies, Ourselves (1973) encouraged women to take responsibility for their own sexual pleasure.18 Lesbianism became more acceptable during this period, bolstered by the beginning of the gay liberation movement in 1969. Two years later, despite Friedan's fear of the "lavender menace," NOW passed a resolution, stating "Be it resolved that a woman's right to her own person includes the right to define and express her own sexuality and to choose her own life style and be it resolved that NOW acknowledges the oppression of lesbians as a legitimate concern of feminism."19

When the site of political struggle moved to the domestic sphere, heterosexual desire came under scrutiny as the force that keeps women tied to men. Catharine MacKinnon would put the critique this way:

Sexual desire in women, at least in this culture, is socially constructed as that by which we come to want our own self-annihilation. That is, our subordination is eroticized in and as female; in fact, we get off on it to a degree, if nowhere near as much as men do. . . . I'm saying femininity as we know it is how we come to want male dominance, which most emphatically is not in our interest.20

The attempt of radical feminists to address this dilemma began with calls to renounce heterosexuality entirely. Because of the cultural force and institutional power of male dominance, radicals argued, women could have truly equal relationships only with other women. Even heterosexual women were called upon to refrain from sex with men and become "political lesbians," even if not sexual ones.21

As this line of argument progressed, it unfortunately took on a dogmatic tone that led to a series of splits, including the gay/straight split that divided the movement in the 1970s.22 Many straight feminists did not appreciate statements like this one: "Men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy. . . . Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sisters and hinders our struggle. . . . If you engage in any form of sexual activity with a man you are reinforcing his class power."23 While this argument makes sense given the assumptions of radical feminist analysis, some heterosexual women understandably felt attacked and subsequently left the movement. Unfortunately, the gay-straight split seriously undermined solidarity among women and weakened support for feminism.24

The attempt of second-wave feminists to solve the conflict between gender equality and sexual desire by renouncing heterosexuality could not eliminate the problem desire poses to equality. As it turned out, some lesbians found themselves attracted to and actively embraced the same type of dominance and submission denounced by MacKinnon and others as central to heterosexuality. That is to say, they rejected the ideal of sexual egalitarianism that had been central to second-wave feminism and publicly endorsed playing with power and inequality in the context of lesbian sadomasochism (S/M). The desire of self-identified feminists to engage in sexual practices that seemed violent and oppressive destroyed the idea that there could be one perspective on sexuality that all feminists share. While advocates of lesbian S/M spoke as sexual minorities claiming the right to pursue their desires, opponents stood in judgment, equating consensual S/M with abuse and comparing it to Nazi genocide and the Inquisition.25 While this conflict may seem obscure, it created a serious split within the second wave.

Debates over pornography and sex work were equally divisive. Radical feminists understood pornography and prostitution as essential parts of patriarchy. Andrea Dworkin famously defined pornography as "the graphic depiction of vile whores" and proclaimed it "central to the male sexual system," insisting it "does not have any other meaning."26 Female "sex trade workers," however, viewed their profession through very different eyes. Refusing the label of "victim," they offered an alternative view of feminism that emphasized their right to pursue their own desires. As one woman put it, "We've been out there doing our own
thing, fighting all the fights that you possibly can to be females in any way we choose, and that’s our right and our power. We were out there doing it long before the feminists came in and started picketing clubs, saying that we were exploiting ourselves.” Feminism, she argues, is about “personal empowerment,” and “the choice to be a stripper,” she insists is “personally empowering.”

Divisive debates about heterosexuality also continued. Dworkin argued that sexual intercourse in reality is a use and an abuse simultaneously. . . . There is no analogue anywhere among subordinate groups of people to this experience of being made for intercourse: for penetration, entry, occupation. . . . Intercourse is a particular reality for women as an inferior class; and it has in it, as part of it, violation of boundaries, taking over, occupation, destruction of privacy.

Not only does Dworkin’s analysis portray the sexual practices of the vast majority of women as anti-feminist, but her totalizing language seems to allow no room for other interpretations of heterosexual relations.

While it is certainly necessary for feminists to offer analyses and make judgments about a wide array of practices, when a totalizing view is offered as the feminist position—like S/M is abuse, pornography is male dominance, or intercourse is violation—it is understandable that women whose sexual proclivities are being criticized might respond with defensiveness and anger. While theoretically an exchange of views can be productive, criticisms of women’s personal “choices,” often become, well, personal. For example, Joan Nestle, a feminine lesbian who finds masculine women attractive, reports being told by a member of Women Against Pornography “that if I write about butch-femme relationships in the past, I am O.K., but if I am writing about them now in any positive way, I am on the ‘enemy list’ ” and a “believer in patriarchal sex.”

Statements that seem judgmental of other women’s choices—particularly when they are not really “choices” but rather deep-seated desires or identities—can undermine the solidarity necessary to build a political movement. While it might not have been the intent of feminist theorists or activists to make women feel attacked, when people feel their most personal decisions are being judged or ridiculed, they often respond with anger. When feminists tell prostitutes “You open your legs for the patriarchy,” they should not be surprised to be told, “You’re all a bunch of fucking madonnas!” This kind of dialogue is not cathartic; it is counterproductive.

In Pleasure and Danger (1989), Dorothy Allison movingly talks about the deep shame women often feel about their own sexuality, especially if it deviates from dominant norms. Why would feminism deepen that shame by standing in judgment of women’s most intimate desires? Nestle recounts the story of her working-class mother, who suffered years of societal judgment and persecution because she enjoyed sex with men in a way that was considered promiscuous and vulgar. She recounts,

As Andrea Dworkin’s litany . . . rang out that afternoon, I saw my mother’s small figure with her inkstained calloused hands, never without a cigarette, held out toward me and she said, “So nu, Joan, is this the world you wanted me to have, where I should feel shame and guilt for what I like? I did for all those years of my life. . . . Don’t scream [ideology] at me, but help to change the world so no woman feels shame or fear because she likes to fuck.

Unfortunately, painful conflicts such as these eventually split second-wave feminism into so-called “pro-sex” and “anti-sex” camps. The judgmental stance many feminists took towards women whose desires seemed to reinforce or mimic patriarchal power relations seriously damaged the feminist movement. Even today, fallout can be seen in the still popular caricature of second-wave feminists as “anti-male, anti-sex, anti-femininity, and anti-fun.” Even if they are too young to have personal experience with the “sex wars,” women today often see feminism as narrow-minded and judgmental, which contributes to the “I’m not a feminist but . . . ” phenomenon.

**The Emergence of Third-Wave Feminism**

In the 1990s, a third wave of American feminism began to emerge that seeks to revitalize feminism and avoid contentious splits over sexual issues. Third-wave pioneer Rebecca Walker believes a new wave of feminism is needed because many young women view second-wave feminism as rigid, judgmental, and divisive. They believe, she argues, that in order to be a feminist one must live in poverty, always critique, never marry, want to censor pornography and/or worship the Goddess. A feminist must never compromise herself, must never make concessions for money or for love, must always be devoted to the uplift of her gender, must only make an admirable and selfless livelihood, preferably working for a women’s organization. She fears that if she wants to be spanked before sex, wants to own a BMW, is a Zen priest, wants to be treated “like a lady,” prioritizes racial oppression over gender oppression, loves misogynist hip-hop music, still speaks to the father that abused her, gets married, wants to raise three kids on a farm in Montana, etc., that she can’t be a feminist.

Walker explains that her capacious view of feminism developed as the solution to the problem of not wanting to judge friends and family.

Third-wave feminism reintroduces the ideal of sexual liberation into a feminist discourse that many believe came, by the 1980s, to prioritize gender equality over sexual autonomy and to view sexual desire as problematic. According to Leslie Heywood, the new movement “defends pornography, sex work, sadomasochism, and butch/femme roles, but it also recuperates heterosexuality, intercourse, marriage, and sex toys from separatist feminist dismis-
Third-wave feminism strives to be inclusive and respectful of the wide variety of choices women make as they attempt to balance equality and desire.

Third-wave feminism is pluralistic and begins with the assumptions that women do not share a common gender identity or set of experiences and that they often interpret similar experiences differently. It seeks to avoid exclusions based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and so forth. It recognizes that women in different subject positions often have very different perspectives. For example, as feminists of color pointed out during the second wave, while white women fought for the right to work outside the home, Black women had almost always worked outside the home by necessity. Consequently, many Black women would prefer to stay home and care for their own families, rather than caring for the children of white women, newly entering the workforce. The right to work looks different, depending on where you stand.

Third-wave feminism accepts the reality that multiple definitions of feminism exist simultaneously. For example, Hirshman insists that feminism requires women to pursue the same kind of life traditionally pursued by upper middle class men and argues that “by any measure, a life of housework and child care does not meet [the] standards for a good human life.” Lauri Unmanky, on the other hand, views mothering as central to feminism; she appeals to cultural feminism, maternal thinking, and the ethics of care, discourses that emphasize women’s traditional practices as a positive alternative to patriarchal culture. Ariel Levy criticizes “raunch culture” for marketing objectification as liberation. Nina Hartley, on the other hand, consciously chose a career in pornography not only to fulfill her deep-seated sexual desires but also to express her sex-positive philosophy of life, which she says grew out of her involvement in the “radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s,” including early second-wave feminism.

With no common identity, experiences, or definition of feminism, each feminist must make a conscious decision about how to determine her own path through the contradictory discourses that constitute contemporary society. “As [women] struggle to formulate a feminism they can call their own,” Walker explains, “they debunk the stereotype that there is one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment, and instead offer self-possession, self-determination, and an endless array of non-dichotomous possibilities.” Walker depicts third-wavers as “pioneers, outlaws who demand to exist whole and intact, without cutting or censoring parts of themselves,” which she considers “the very best legacy of feminism.” Thus, third-wave feminism is not driven by the desire “to escape the dilemmas of feminism in our personal lives,” as Ferguson contends—as if that is even possible—but by conscious struggle with life’s competing demands.

Because of its commitment to pluralism and respect for self-determination, third-wave feminism rejects judgmentalness. Lacking a common definition of feminism makes it difficult to judge another woman’s claim to be a feminist because a wide variety of choices—including contradictory ones—could be justified as feminist. In addition, it is hard to make judgments because a choice that appears anti-feminist at first might look very different when properly contextualized. For example, a woman in lipstick, heels, and a low-cut top might appear to reinforce patriarchal standards of beauty. But what if she appears in public on a butch lesbian’s arm? And what does it mean that a gorgeous blonde posing in Playboy chooses to call herself a “feminist,” when most readers of that magazine probably view feminists as anti-sex and anti-male? Perhaps by eroticizing feminism, she helps build support for political goals, such as reproductive freedom, policies to create work/life balance, and safe, affordable childcare.

In my view, feminism cannot tell any woman how to resolve her internal conflicts, but it does ask each woman to reflect on her own desires and seriously consider how her choices might play a role in propelling up or calling into question the sex/gender system. A “surrendered wife” might ask herself, “When I submit to my husband, does he view me as an equal with different needs or as a subordinate whose needs are less important than his?” A Playboy centerfold might ask herself, “Am I really expressing my deep-seated sexual desires or just indulging my own narcissism? Does the sexualized image I am projecting expand the boundaries of gender and sexuality for women or restrict them?” A “hip-hop” feminist might ask herself, “While I enjoy dominant men, what impact do misogynistic messages in popular music have on the socialization of young girls?” I do not believe, in contrast to Marso, that women need to justify their choices to some imagined feminist community, but I do believe that everyone should consider the impact their choices have on themselves, other people, and the entire ranges of values they hold dear, when they decide how to live.
production, we should continue working to expand the possibilities for women to imagine themselves outside the boxes of patriarchy—whether girl gone wild, submissive wife, or selfless mom—by offering images of alternative relationships, genders, and sexualities. Pornographic sexuality, conservative lifestyles, and self-sacrifice for family all have a place in society, but they should be simply three options among many, not new hegemonic norms.

Given its basic assumptions, third-wave feminism will probably never produce the kind of collective social movement that existed in the second wave. Because it strives to be inclusive of all, collective action constitutes one of its biggest challenges. Third-wave feminism has no illusions about reconstituting “women” as the subject of feminism or creating some kind of unified platform. Instead it asks women to work together in coalitions to address issues of shared concern. Third-wave feminism focuses attention on equality and freedom for women in an array of discursive locations. Far from viewing feminist conversations as over, it imagines them as never-ending.

Notes
1 Fretté 2008, 128.
2 Morgan 2006, 11.
3 Doyle 2001, 153, 158.
4 Wolf 2006, 15.
5 Hernández and Rehman 2002, xxii.
6 Darraj 2002, 310.
7 Marso 2006.
8 Ibid., 114.
9 Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 83.
10 Ferguson 2010, 250.
11 Darraj 2002, 310.
12 Ferguson 2010, 248.
13 Friedan 1983, 310.
14 Ibid., 317.
15 Ibid., 304.
18 Evans 2003, 50.
19 Rosen 2000, 166; Evans 2003, 51.
24 Echols 1989, 240.
27 Bell 1987, 195.
28 Ibid., 190.
29 Dworkin 2006, 155–156.
31 Bell 1987, 206, 11.
33 Nestle 1989, 122.
34 Snyder 2008.
35 My analysis of third-wave feminism draws on Snyder 2008.
36 Walker 1995, xxxii.
37 Heywood 2006, 260.
38 Highleyman 1997, 146.
39 Hirshman 2006, 33.
40 Umansky 1996, 11.
41 Levy 2005.
42 Hartley 1997, 57, 59.
43 Walker 1995, xxxiv.
44 Walker 1995, xxxv.
45 Ferguson 2010, 250.
47 Marso 2010.

References


