Women: Feminism, Sexuality, and Equality in the Work Place

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Absract

The second wave feminists, who were the activists of the 1950 to 1980 era, worked tirelessly to transform the role of women in business. These feminists fought for a work environment with women thriving and producing alongside of men—an environment where women are respected for their accomplishment with no regard to their sexuality or dress code. Feminists envisioned that women will educate themselves, pick a career path, and eliminate their dependencies on men. So, they paved the road for women by lobbying for equal rights legislation, raising awareness of inequality in the workplace, changing the steel minds of board members at Ivy League colleges to admit more women, and working on the women themselves to make them believe in their power to achieve their goals.

And women responded to the Feminists vision in a vigorous way. Today, over 50% of the business college graduates are women, over 46% of the workforce is women, and over 37% of the business managerial positions are held by women. Women have been catching up with men in their earnings as well; in 2004 women earned 80% of their male counterparts' salary as compared to 63% in 1963 (U.S. Dept of Labor, 2005).

And now there is no turning back—the economy can't run with 46% of its workforce staying home. All companies, big and small, recognize the value that women bring to their companies, and some have proven to run more successfully with women at the helm (Pile, 2005). In addition, the average household needs two wage earners to meet today's financial demands. Also, women recognize the meaning that work brings to their lives. So, have the second wave feminists succeeded?

Although feminists came close to their vision, and millions of women joined the workforce, a deeper look provides us with a more accurate status of businesswomen in the workforce today. Only 8% of the executive titles are held by women (Heffernan, 2004). Most of the managerial positions held by women are at the bottom layer of the management pyramid (HBR, 2005). Shockingly, although America has opened its doors to the 50% population women college graduates entering the working world, it has locked its gates on promotions above the first management tier, except for the few that were able to knock the gates down.

Unforeseen by the second wave feminists who lobbied for women not to be subservient to men, and not live their lives as sexual objects, was a wave created by the media and entertainment industry: The women's sexual revolution. This revolution has freed women from sexual inhibitions, and immersed them in a new pool of male influence. This revolution has created contradictory images to the ones envisioned by feminists who fought for equality and freedom from the control of men. The images of women who are focused on working, achieving, educating themselves, and fitting in with men has become mixed up with images of women who are focused on their

sexuality, their bodies, their orgasms, their plastic surgeries, and their aggressiveness in the bedroom. This movement has caused a paradox of issues to women in society and in the business world.

And as we progress in a new phase of feminism, a phase where the society has proclaimed freedom from prejudice against women, it appears as if the doors are open for women at every gate. Protective legislation exists to enable women to tussle their way to the top at every industry and every work-role. Women have realized the meaning of full productive lives unlimited to the role of a mother and housewife. It seems that the only wall blocking women from achieving gender equality in work place is the women themselves. Yet the statistics show that women are still held back at the low managerial level and that the entertainment industry is making millions of dollars by promoting women as sexual objects. Given the current set of issues, what can the businesswoman do to harness her image in the business world?

Issues Hurting Women in Business

When Jessica Simpson came out with her music video, "These Boots are Made for Walking," she left all of us thinking that women like to rule using their sexual power. When Renée Zellweger in her movie, "Chicago," used temptation with men to get out of prison and progress in her career as an entertainer, she reemphasized the image of woman who manipulates her surroundings, using her sexual command. In the movie, "Erin Brokovich," Julia Roberts worked in a professional environment, surrounded by attorneys and legal staff, but still felt justified using her feminine assets to maneuver and solve the case. All of these examples reemphasize the image of a manipulative woman who uses her feminine edge to gain an extra advantage. So, when the businesswoman makes any attempt to be feminine or sexy at the workplace, it immediately triggers an image of a manipulative individual in the mind of her coworkers and superiors.

Paris Hilton has consumed millions—maybe billions—of dollars of media time for her sexy blond look, softness, sexiness, and nothingness, and her image has had a penetrating influence on everyone. Every American girl would give an arm to play in her world for a day, and certainly not that of Meg Whitman, CEO of Ebay. Every American male relives his fantasies with the Paris Hilton image: soft, cuddly, and hardly speaks. It is a challenge to find anyone who can remember a single thing Paris Hilton has said other than her famous phrase, "That's hot." Yet we have a full generation of teenage women who want to be as thin as her, as blonde as her, and as seductive as her. If the entertainment industry and Paris Hilton have profited millions of dollars promoting her image, one has to wonder at whose expense was that profit made and how much did the Paris Hilton image hurt the businesswoman.

Debra Barone, the influential feminine character of, "Everybody Loves Raymond," whose personality and demeanor is admired by men and women combined, seems completely fulfilled with her domestic role as wife and full-time mother of three in the 21st century. This leaves an impression with everyone that a woman's most important role in society is to continue to be the full time caretaker of the family: If she lacks the financial means, then she can pursue work avenues, only for financial gains, and not for personal ambition and fulfillment. Most of us would not agree with Debra if she decided to pursue her career interests and sent the three children to daycare. The show clearly churns out advocates of the full time domestic mother who is supposed to be fully satisfied with her motherly role, and this image wipes out generations of feminists who fought for the right of a woman to pursue a career identity outside of her homemaker one.

In the office, when a woman with children discloses her daycare arrangement, men and women can't stop themselves from wondering how badly she needs her salary and thinking that perhaps her family is better off with her at home. So when the managerial businesswoman who has sweat bullets to gain her status at work shows a sliver of weakness, tiredness, domestic worry, or motherly emotion, men and women cast a shadow of incompetence that hinders her career.

As described in, "Through Women's Eyes," by Dubois and Dumenil, feminists spent decades fighting the women objectification depicted in Miss America Contests, which highlighted the women walking down the runway, showing their bikini bodies to the top bidder. These pageants purport to represent what young women should aspire

for as grown ups: beautiful bodies, average brains and obsequious mannerisms. At the same time, women activists picketed in front of the offices of "Playboy" and "Home Journal" magazines, demonstrating to women across the nation the danger of this personification (Dubois, Dumenil 2005). Women feminists and writers such as Kate Millett devoted their lives to the cause of freeing women from the stereotypes and patriarchy (DuBois, E.C & Dumenil L, 2005). These activists' fight for freedom was treacherous, poorly funded, and harshly judged by society. While these activists were fighting for the cause, we had the entertainment industry, mostly lead by men, crafting up ways to use women's freedom to their cause of greed and profit. Images of half-naked women in music videos filled our television screens, and teens partying, engaging in sexual behaviors, and having one night stands became standard episodes on television programs.   We also had a capitalist society supporting and sustaining the entertainment industry's power and a passive government too busy collecting taxes on the reaped profits. What has transpired in the last two decades was that for every image of a woman achieving a milestone in her business career, there were hundreds of images of women degrading themselves and using their sexuality as commodity. As a result, the businesswoman image was muddled with the sexually commoditized woman. In numerous instances, men in business were looking at the businesswoman, doubting and questioning, "Which woman are you?" These factors undoubtedly added to sexual harassment incidences in the workplace. While it may appear that we have fewer incidences of harassment lawsuits in the workplace, women report a 50%-80% incidence rate that mostly goes unreported (Heffernan, 2004). Women often understand that reporting harassment is just as damaging to their own career as it is to the careers of the men they are reporting on.

The media's influence on this generation of women is immeasurable. We can only judge by the change in feminism since the sixties and the seventies, which was best summarized by Ariel Levy in "Female Chauvinist Pigs." She says, " 'Liberation' and 'empowerment' are still buzzwords, but they once referred to bucking the system, going on strike against submission, adopting a brazen, bra-less, unshaven, untrammeled approach to life. These terms have since been drained of meaning…. What has moved into feminism's place as the most pervasive phenomenon in American womanhood is an almost opposite style, attitude, and set of principles." Ariel refers to the sexual revolution that has dominated the minds of women who instead of going bra-less are having breast augmentations, and instead of accepting their bodies, they are having endless plastic surgeries to enhance their sexual image.

This sexual revolution has many other consequences. Women are freed from being the passive member in the initiation of a relationship; they are freed from the traditional societal requirement of being bashful and inhibited in a relationship. It is now acceptable for women to pursue guys for a date, dress sexy and desirably, and to act sexually assertive in a relationship. This and the fact that women reach the stage of desire to live in committed relationship earlier than men has created a culture of women chasing men. Also the fact that men and women consider the workplace as a safe location for meeting the opposite sex has increased dating arrangements occurring there. Add to this the plethora of sexual-rated material on cable channels, movies, and music videos, and it will explain the creation of a business environment electrified by sex. If a woman dresses sexy at work, her male colleague's reaction may be, "She is acting seductive to me," followed by, "Which woman is she?" Also, if a woman acts feminine, her colleagues accuse her of playing the sex manipulation game. On the other hand, if a woman keeps to herself, she is too reclusive and sexually unassertive. There is no winning card that the businesswoman can play.

Women who are unaware of this psychology at work, who dress trendy and borderline sexy, hinder themselves from promotions unconsciously. Their male managers will assume that these women are not serious about their careers or the business that they conduct. Given that the majority of the managerial and executive positions remain in the hands of men, these men will naturally avoid promoting women who may appear to be in pursuit of men, yet they are more tolerant of men who maybe in the same situation.   The business environment has been poisoned with the permeation of the societal sexual trends into the workplace, which includes dating and sexual openness at work, and this poison is a detriment to the advancement of the businesswoman.

Another slew of issues hurting women in business are the common myths about the differences between men and women. These myths, although somewhat applicable to husband and wife relationships, permeate to corporate conference rooms and boardrooms, creating an aura of unpredictability surrounding the female business manager. The female business manager working with and for male managers needs to fit in with her colleagues and to highlight the similarity of her managerial style. So when a highly popular book such as John Gray's book, "Men are

from Mars, Women are from Venus," underscores that men and women communicate so differently, and that they listen and understand the same messages differently, these stereotypes harm the businesswomen, making them appear unpredictable, emotional, and difficult to understand. Consider these phrases differentiating men and women from John Gray's book: "A man's sense of self is defined through his ability to achieve results," and "A woman's sense of self is defined through her feelings and the quality of her relationships." So a man's sense of self is more aligned with business objectives than a woman's is. Gray also asserts that, "Just as a man is fulfilled though working out the intricate details of solving a problem, a woman is fulfilled through talking about the details of her problems." In other words, a man is results-oriented and a problem solver, while the woman is an emotional, brainless creature who is focused on expressing her feelings and making best friends. These stereotypes are dangerous to the female's business image.   They also give male managers or co-workers an excuse to blame a miscommunication or managerial mishap on the gender differences.

Although women today constitute 46% of the work force in the United States (Heffernan, 2004), nearly 40% of career women take an off ramp and leave work to take care of their families or otherwise at one point in their paths (HBR, 2005).   Also, one in three white women who have earned an MBA is not working full time, and only 38% of the female MBA graduates hold full-time careers (HBR, 2005).   A significant percentage of women try out the business track for a while, get frustrated with the politics and demands of the workplace, get caught in their desire to have a family, and conclude that the work place is not what it is drummed up to be. They therefore decide to take the easy way out and become fulltime housewives and mothers. Despite the increase in the percentage of working women in households from 59% to 72% in the last 25 years (Geddes, 1998), these working women hold shorter career terms than men and have longer leaves of absences due to their families. These statistics reveal that women continue to desire to put their family first at the expense of their careers. Women pay a high price for this decision, as their average pay continues to be significantly less than men, and their percentage of managerial positions continues to lag. Meanwhile, they continue to hand men the fruits of their labor by giving up their hard-earned positions for men. It is a vicious, treacherous circle of trading equality in the workplace for family.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling with Men on Top

Perhaps the strongest remaining barrier for the advancement of business women to managerial and executive positions is the large male population holding these positions at the top.   As indicated before, 8% of executive positions and 37% managerial positions are held by men, respectively. The decision to promote an equally qualified woman vs. a man is a tough one. Imagine a male vice president of a large company who has a promotion decision to make on his team. He is considering candidates qualifications, but also has to consider the impact of new manager on the team performance. This executive's evaluation is firmly tied to the managers' performance below him; his bonuses are dependent on the profitability of his subordinates, and he has a man and a woman with equal credentials and performance to consider promoting. Also, imagine that this executive is surrounded by male vice presidents who watch and judge his decision. If he is not required by top management to promote a percentage of women to these slots, his decision to promote a man is more logical, more predictable, and a less contentious choice.   If he promotes a woman, he will be taking a risk on her productivity in the case she decides to divert to the family track. As an executive, he is more comfortable managing men and feels that he understands them more. Also, he runs a lesser risk of a harassment and discrimination lawsuit when promoting men over women. Another advantage in his mind is that he can push a male manager on deadlines more than a female manager, since he feels a female manger may be too sensitive, emotional, and unequipped to handle the stress. If this is the first woman manager he is promoting on the team, his team dynamics are greatly affected, and suddenly, all his old management techniques are under inspection. If it is his second attempt to promote a woman manager on his team, then his choice is greatly influenced by what happened the first time. If the first attempt was marginally successful, this may cause him to choose a man for the job.

Nevertheless, the existence of anti-discrimination laws and the high cost of litigation have paved the way for many women to be promoted, and, it is rare to find large established companies without written policies that help promote women to managerial positions. But even with the help of plan and anti-discrimination laws, women still run into a glass ceiling. One example is Deloitte and Touche, an accounting firm with a strategic plan to promote women. The firm found out that, although they had been hiring a workforce composed of 33% to 50% women out of college

annually, they retained a much lesser percentage a decade later. In fact they found that only 14% of their partners were women. When Deloitte and Touche studied the results, they initially thought that women were leaving for a mommy track or family moves, yet with further analysis, they discovered that a significant percentage of women were leaving because they were not happy with the assignments that were handed out to them. Male managers had been favoring male subordinates for the premier assignments, and this frustrated women who were competing for these top assignments (HBR 2005). In Deloitte's case, measures were put in place to monitor women's career, mentor them, and mentor the male managers on staff; however, we can safely assume that the same problem is still occurring at other firms.

Another common scenario of a glass room surrounding businesswomen is the old boys-club network. It is naturally easier for men to socialize with each other after work, such as having drinks, playing golf on weekends, or socializing with clients. A lot of information sharing occurs at these events without time pressure of the workplace. Women find it difficult to break into these circles. Even when women are invited to these social circles, it often feels awkward. Yet, it is critical that women socialize with members on their teams to build rapport, commonality, and friendship that will aid them on the business floor. In a recent survey, 41% of women who reported the top reasons holding them back from advancement in the workplace cited "exclusion from informal networks of communication" as one of the reasons, and 33% reported "male stereotyping and preconceptions of women" as another (Heffernan, 2004).

Where Should the Businesswoman Focus her Energy?

Women currently hold over 46% of the jobs in the US and earn 80 cents on the dollar of a man's earning (U.S. Dept of Labor, 2005) Women's enrollment in college is higher than men's and is up to 55% of total enrollment. Women earn more than half of the masters degrees awarded (HBR 2005). At a glance, women appear to get more education, yet they only hold approximately 37% of the managerial positions and 8% of the senior management slots. Analyzing further the managerial percentage, we notice that women mostly occupy the bottom layer of the managerial sector. Dividing this sector into four layers, we notice that 58% of the managerial women occupy the lowest levels of the pyramid, 28% occupy the second layer, 11.5% occupy the third layer, and only 1.5% is at the top of managerial pyramid (HBR, 2005). On the surface, opportunities for men and women appear to be equal; anti-discrimination laws are in place to protect women from sexual harassment and gender discrimination, and the pipeline of educated, capable, ambitious women is full. But there are mountains of gender inequities that have to be excavated.

In addition, it has been proven that utilizing women in the workplace has given our labor force a competitive advantage internationally (HBR, 2005). As a nation, we have invested and utilized 50% of our society in a productive manner. With 46% of the labor force consisting of women, we can easily translate that into significant GDP dollars. We have also raised our average household income significantly with two wage earner families. No company can deny the huge benefits that women bring to the work place. There are also statistics linking companies' profitability to women's leadership (Pile, 2005).

What if businesswomen today set a vision for the next generation? They certainly would dream of a workplace where women can work without sexual harassment and stereotyping, one where men and women hold equal percentages of senior and midlevel management positions, and where women can have as many role model superiors as men. They would envision a workplace that affords women a decade of a flexible mommy-track without forcing them completely out of job, a workplace that welcome women back from her family time and help situate her, a workplace where men and women work side by side without the sexual tension forced upon them by the media and the raunch culture. How do we get there? Who needs to be involved? We will have to start with the current players in the equation: Executive women, managerial women, the entrepreneurial women, companies, their management and the government.

Women in the executive slots have had to sacrifice so much of their personal lives to hold on to their seats. One of their biggest sacrifices is that they are often childless; only 40-50% of them are married (Heffernan, 2004). These

women had to make a hard choice early on between family and career. They traded their family time with equality dollars. These few women on top are the beacons for this generation of women and the next. They are so influential in their ability to pull up more women to their ranks. Their image has to be impeccable and their leadership must be unquestionable. And just as Gina Davis (President in "Commander in Chief" episodes) hasn't premiered in a sexy cocktail dress yet, these women are better off keeping a consistent image of leadership dress at all time.

Fortune magazine recently profiled the top 50 most powerful women in fortune 500 companies. The following are a few that made the list: Meg Whitman (Age 49), Chairman and CEO of eBay, Andrea Jung (Age 47) Chairman and CEO of Avon, Pat Woertz (Age 52) EVP at Chevron, Ann Moore (Age 55) Chairman and CEO of Time Inc., and Karen Katen (Age 56) Vice Chairman and President of Human Health at Pfizer (Yang, Levenson, 2005). These women are truly at the top when they are leading at eBay, Avon, Chevron, Time Inc., and Pfizer. Note the paradox of woman/Chairman in some of the examples above: these women are truly changing the world.

The managerial woman is occupying the lower ranks of this pyramid. Since 58% of the managerial women are still at the bottom layer of the managerial track, they are not compensated fairly for their education, qualification and effort; thus, this is the sector that requires the most attention. This managerial woman is educated, highly capable, and ambitious. At the same time, she is underpaid, under-promoted and heavily overworked since she remains to be the primary family caretaker. She trades highly priced equality dollars to obtain and raise a family. She seldom works with women networks and associations since she can't afford the time; therefore, she is immobilized to break out of her rank.

So much work can be done here: first women have got to understand their productive career spans better; no woman who went to college, worked outside of the house, and pursued her dreams and ambitions will be willing to throw it all for a permanent mommy track if she knows she has a choice. As a society, we have to build the necessary infrastructure to these women. We have allowed the cars to travel without building the roads. Companies must recognize the mommy-track decade. Women must be allowed to get on the mommy-track for a period of time and jump back on to the most productive track for the remaining span of their careers. As a government, we have to provide infrastructure in the form of quality day-care centers. These centers can be a source of employment for many of the less-trained, possibly college students or women seeking part-time positions. I wonder what small percentage of the defense budget can be diverted to education to build this infrastructure, and what huge benefit it will provide to our highly productive society.

Managerial women must organize and belong to groups where they can form supportive networks for each other. These networks can bring about awareness, identification of problems, and solutions to issues facing managerial women. Additionally, these networks can train women on how tackle issues such as sexual harassment that can't be reported, old boys' club isolation issues, or promotions. Many solutions in this area should come from the private sector or companies themselves. Companies now realize that they have to address some of these issues out in the open. They realize that when 58% of the managerial women are kept on the bottom, they are losing expensive training dollars, misusing the talent pool, and losing productivity by shutting out talented, dedicated women (HBR 2005). Companies understand the value that women bring to business. If the company's business is in consumer products and half the consumers are women, it is a must to have women on the management team. If the company's business is in financial products, or healthcare, women have proven to be competitive candidates in those fields and businesses can't ignore good candidates. Deloitte and Touche took a revolutionary step in solving this problem. Realizing the training dollars that they were spending on recruiting and training women and understanding the importance of keeping a balanced work force, they started tracking women more closely. They also put a monitoring system in place and incentives to track women retention percentages and increase them. They educated all of their partners and managers on combating stereotypes that prevented men and women from working effectively together. They built an infrastructure that allowed men and women to work together comfortably without stereotypes. They also desensitized men and women against sexual tension (HBR 2005).

 Businesswomen as a group should lobby against the media's exploitation of women. Regulators should restrict the boundaries around the entertainment industry and its produced shows. Take, for instance, the number of soap opera, prime time shows, and dating contests focused on casual sex that have aired, corrupting our society and the minds of

our young women. Specifically, shows like, "Sex in the City," and "Desperate Housewives" mix women's sexual freedom with women throwing themselves at men in the name of freedom. How many healthy relationships between men and women can these shows influence? And how many businesswomen will have their image tarnished with the image of Teri Hatcher? Women feminists have been good lobbyists in the last few decades due to the nature of the problems that bring them together. They understand that they have to work together for the good of the group, more so than men (Edwalds, Stocker, 1995), and therefore, they should use their power to implement more regulations against the exploitation of women. If all women knew that Reebok, who promotes the empowerment of women in their advertising campaigns, has promoted less that 17% of women to their executives positions, women would look differently at their advertisements (Ferree, Lorber Hess, 1999).

The managerial woman has to understand her business image in the workplace. There is no room in the workplace for adjectives like "sexy," "hot," or anything in between. All interactions that this woman has with her superiors, subordinates, and coworkers have to be weighed against her advancement in her business career. If her interactions appear borderline playful, she should know that she just traded some costly equality dollars for fun. If she is dating a co-worker, her relationship should be kept private and confidential. If she unconsciously or consciously selects a sexy dress code since it make her feel wanted, she should know that she just paid costly equality dollars for her high sexual index. This doesn't mean that she can't dress sexy and feminine on her personal time, but in the workplace, she should look and act like the next manager if she wants to make it to an executive level. Always memorizing her image in the mirror, this woman should ask herself before leaving to work in the morning and as she decides what to wear for the day, "What does this outfit say to the people around me? What messages does it convey?" If the response to her questions is anything other than a business-oriented, managerial woman whose sexuality is private, then she should reconsider changing her attire.

This is not to say that employers don't have the responsibility to protect their employees from sexual harassment. On the contrary, as Finsterbusch and McKenna state in "Taking Sides," "While women do have the responsibility to communicate when sexual attention is unwelcome, the employer has a prior legal responsibility to create an environment where no woman is punished for refusing to accept offensive behavior." Employers should have policies on sexual harassment, should make it easy for women to come forward and report, and should protect women who report incidences.

Businesswomen who are parents understand the pleasure of having a career and a family, especially if they have the societal and family support to enable them to do both. Women who continue to work during their motherly years are often more fulfilled than those who stay at home, and thus, they make better parents. Parents, both men and women, will need flexible arrangements at work during the demanding parenting years, and society should support them with friendly legislation that allows these arrangements. Work and family balance issues are not only women issues, but they are also men issues. Men strive to be better fathers and husbands for their families. Men and women, as part of a productive society that demands a couple to work, strive for a life where they can balance a family, children and a career. And perhaps it is time for our capitalistic society to reexamine its structure of pushing men and women to hold unrealistic work schedules, driving consumerism up to heighten the demand on products, and thus increasing the number of hours necessary to support a family. This scheme worsens any possibility of work and family balance.

The New Definition of Equality

With all the aforementioned conundrums, is it possible for women to have it all: career, family, children and a balanced work and life schedule? Of course it is. Furthermore, if it is logistically difficult in the present time to have it all, women must fight for the right to make it easier. Women should not be conflicted about having it all. Rather, women have to lobby for a new phase of equality where the societal infrastructure is put into place, where companies' social responsibility is redefined to cater to balance life for employees, where the government legislation requires corporations to develop friendly practices to working mothers and parents, and where the entertainment industry is restricted from the further degradation of women.

The new meaning of equality doesn't stop at providing equal rights legislation, but it plows further. It requires a societal visionary plan to support this productive culture with appropriate schools and daycares to support working couples; it requires corporations to not only support equal rights policies, but also to monitor their effectiveness; it requires corporations to interview women leaving their posts and document the reasons for women's attrition; it also requires corporations to become socially responsible and to provide a work environment that supports work and family balance arrangements.

As for the businesswoman, let her not forget that achieving equality comes with a lot of responsibility. Equality means that she can't pack up her bags and go home every time she faces an obstacle with her management. It also means that she can't give up on her career just because she found a husband. In addition, equality means that she can't be confused about her feminine image vs. her business image.

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