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## Feminism, Religion, and Work in the United States

Margaret R. Halpin  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Feminism, Religion, and Work in the United States

## Abstract

Feminism in the contemporary United States is a diverse field of thought with several strains of ideological leanings, including liberal, neoliberal, and the contested conservative feminism. Each is uniquely situated in the American context due to the heavy influence of American values and culture-specific definitions of justice, success, and progress. Entrenched in the Western conceptions of secularism and advancement, “modern” feminism in the United States prides itself as the example of peak progressivism, yet does so without critically engaging with its definition of modernity or secularism. In particular, the relationship between religion and feminism is complicated in the U.S., with intersections between the ideas of secularism, justice, and tradition resulting in conflicts between religious and secular understandings of feminism. This paper draws on the results from interviews with 6 college-age and 2 Gen-X subjects of different religions, and analyzes the state of the contemporary understanding of the relationship between feminism, religion, and the valuation of breadwinning versus caregiving in the U.S. The interviews point to a widespread liberal feminist outlook that prioritizes social justice and a choice-based approach to work-life balance, and highlights the divides between those who see feminism as naturally religious, those who are caught in the entanglement of patriarchy and religion, and those who see feminism as a secular endeavor.

## Keywords

feminism, religion, United States, breadwinning, caregiving, liberal feminism

## Disciplines

American Politics | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Political Science | Religion

## Comments

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Margaret Halpin

POL 382

Professor Iannello

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## Feminism, Religion, and Work in the United States

### *I. Introduction*

In the United States, feminism has developed in several different directions. The borders between what defines each form of feminism are fluid, and there is extensive dialogue surrounding what is to be considered feminism. Liberal feminism, neoliberal feminism, postfeminism, and the contested conservative feminism are a few of the most prominent modes of feminist discourse in the U.S. Each is uniquely situated in the American context due to the heavy influence of American values and culture-specific definitions of justice, success, and progress. Entrenched in the Western conceptions of secularism and advancement, “modern” feminism in the United States prides itself as the example of peak progressivism, yet does so without critically engaging with its definition of modernity. In part due to the long history of women being caught in the entanglement of religion and other oppressive systems, modernity is often associated with strict secularism, and Western feminism has often rallied against religion or assumed a state of pure secularity. Interestingly, there is an increasing amount of scholarship which delineates the heavy influence of religious values in certain forms of feminism, particularly neoliberal feminism, postfeminism, and the elusive conservative feminism.

### *II. Literature Review*

First, liberal feminism is heavily focused on legal equality and justice on both a familial and global scale. In “A Capacious Account of Liberal Feminism”, Amy R. Baehr writes that an

argument is liberal feminist if it is “just”, if coercive power is rooted in the people’s power and expressed through constitutional democracy, and if the “inner workings” of society are just in their own right, independent from the basic structure of society (Baehr 2017, 2). In this context, Baehr defines justice as an arrangement that is absent of “coercively enforced gender hierarchy or traditional gender roles” in both the basic structure of society as well as its inner workings (Baehr 2017, 4). In this account of liberal feminism, the “inner workings” of society are families, and justice in the family is expressed through the equal distribution of income, domestic labor, and care. In this case, “care” includes childcare as well as any exertion of care needed to maintain interdependent relationships in what Baehr describes as feminist care ethics (Baehr 2017, 6). The male breadwinner model is insufficient in this scenario, particularly in situations where this model is coercively enforced, whether through explicit force or the influence of varying systems of power which make other arrangements extremely challenging to set up, such as the how capitalism disproportionately affects women of lower classes and racial minorities. In order for society as a whole to be just, its inner workings must be just, therefore liberal feminism operates on a systemic and communal scale with a multilayered network of power rather than an individualistic one. Consequently, the family must be just in order for the state to be just, making equality in work-life balance and breadwinning critical to the liberal feminist agenda.

In its unwavering pursuit of “universal” equality and justice, liberal feminism has been criticized for its failure to address diversity and different cultural perceptions of what equality and justice entail (Enslin and Tjiattas 2004, 506). For example, liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin describes a conflict between multiculturalism and the American conception of justice, even going as far as to claim that minority women from “oppressive” cultures “might be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct” or if their culture is

“encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women-at least to the degree to which this value is upheld in the majority culture” (Enslin and Tjiattas 2004, 507). This is in striking contrast with how Christine Williams describes liberal feminism in her piece “The Happy Marriage of Capitalism and Feminism”, where she stresses the systemic injustices which impact women on a class and race based hierarchy that is upheld by the exploitative system of capitalism (Williams 2013, 59). This type of liberal feminism also lends itself well to transnational feminism, where women work to achieve feminism on a global scale while respecting the diverse array of female identities and cultures. Where Orkin describes a parochial liberal feminism only focused on achieving justice within the context of the majority culture, Williams’ liberal feminist description of an all-encompassing social justice inherently recognizes the diverse experiences of women of different socioeconomic statuses and racial backgrounds. Even within the ideology of liberal feminism itself there is an abundance of contrasting opinions.

Due to its emphasis on social justice, liberal feminists tend to decry religion as an oppressive system. Liberal feminism’s focus on justice and equality are deemed strictly secular, as well as its notions of progressivism and modernity. Liberal feminists uphold an ideal of secularism as a form of political citizenship that is distinctly separate from the private practice of religion, yet this uncritical definition of secularism is flawed (Braidotti 2008, 3). For example, religious studies scholar Talal Asad describes how Westerners assume that secularism is the foundation of “modern” society and consequently disregard the remnants of religion and religious values which remain embedded in political structures, eventually self-identifying these religious remnants as secular themselves in order to claim moral legitimacy (Evans 2014). However, this view is inherently in conflict with liberal feminist ideals of social justice and transnational feminism, as the concepts of religion and secularism came out of a colonial desire

to establish the West as the modern and morally superior society against the backwards non-Western “other” (Hawthorne 2014). For example, while the practices and beliefs of Hinduism existed for centuries before Western colonization of South Asia, “Hinduism” as a categorized *religion* was created by colonizers who sought to differentiate themselves from those they wished to colonize. If liberal feminists want to pursue a truly transnational feminism, they must first deconstruct the colonial conception of religion and separate modernity from secularism.

Far different from liberal feminism’s notions of universal justice and equality, neoliberal feminism takes a much more individualized approach. Work-life balance, individual happiness, and ambition begin replacing talk of justice, liberation, and equal rights (Rottenberg, Gill and Banet-Weiser 2020, 7). Rather than advocating for social justice and the deconstruction of systemic oppression through systems such as patriarchy and capitalism, neoliberal feminists contend that capitalism is the solution to gender inequality (Williams 2013, 59). These feminists stress the internal barriers women face, and argue that one woman climbing the corporate ladder is a win for all women. Likewise, much of neoliberal feminist thought focuses on work-life balance. However, recent neoliberal scholarship has shifted to a focus on finding happiness in this balance (Rottenberg 2014, 167). In an attempt to get as close to “having it all” as possible, neoliberal feminists shifted to cost-benefit analyses of their lives in order to maximize their happiness, emphasizing trade-offs and the language of economic theory. For neoliberals, there is a new ideal: not only should women have a work-life balance, but it should be enjoyable.

While the neoliberal focus on happiness and individualism may seem to lend itself to a subjective interpretation of happiness and thus a broader range of what can be defined as feminist, neoliberal feminism is often criticized for its narrow parameters regarding who is included in its ideology. This form of feminism mainly serves an elite and privileged class which

benefits from neoliberalism and capitalism. For example, the shift from liberal to neoliberal feminism was “embodied in the middle-class professional wife and mother” who views progress in terms of domesticity versus professionalism (Dent 2020, 540). In this case, the neoliberal definition of “having it all” is rooted in the uncritical acceptance of “progress”, where the term is defined based on mostly white middle class women’s conception of freedom (Rottenberg 2014, 148). For middle class women, liberation was often constructed through the lens that freedom lie in the public sphere and that domesticity was a part of the oppressive past. Consequently, the neoliberal feminist emphasis on work life is intrinsically connected to this narrative of progress where domesticity is seen as less “modern”, contributing to the continuing stigma around valuing home life over work life despite the attempts of some feminists to make the two equal in value.

Interestingly, neoliberal feminism also has a curious relationship with postfeminism and the Christian prosperity gospel, which is heavily discussed in Katie Rose Sullivan and Helen Delaney’s work “A Femininity That ‘Giveth and Taketh Away’: The Prosperity Gospel and Postfeminism in the Neoliberal Economy”. The prosperity gospel is a contested form of Christianity which stresses individual empowerment as well as the notion that it is God’s intention for people to garner wealth. Sullivan and Delaney define postfeminism as a “hegemonic cultural discourse” which incorporates neoliberal ideas of individualism and hierarchy as well as “anti-feminist” notions of traditional gender roles and submission to masculinity (Sullivan and Delaney 2017, 838). Despite the idea that feminism is secular, scholars have noted that spirituality and religious values are intertwined in the foundation of organization and management culture, creating an “evangelical entrepreneurial femininity” (Sullivan and Delaney 2017, 846). The prosperity gospel presents the protestant work ethic in a way where work is given a higher and more virtuous purpose, which translates to a construction of

femininity built on corporate hierarchy and traditional moral conceptions of womanhood. For example, women are encouraged to reach high levels of corporate power, yet many postfeminist Christian women believe that this is attained through the grace of God, and that they must maintain “natural” female qualities such as beauty and motherhood as they do so. Prosperity gospel ideals are critical to the confluence of female empowerment and traditional gender roles, as religious discourse presents women as “natural” others, where it is in their God given nature to be othered from society (Neimanis 2014). Consequently, tradition is not oppressive but divine.

The authors describe much of the interaction between neoliberalism and the prosperity gospel in terms of agency, where neoliberal success gives women an agency that is discounted by the prosperity gospel doctrine that success is gifted from God, making women responsible for their failures but not their successes. For example, several women at Arbonne, the company the authors included as a case study in their article, cited their lack of success before joining the company as a result of their need to get into a “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality but thanked God for their success once they arrived at the company, echoing statements such as “I thank Him for the vision and faith He has given me, which has enabled me to experience success in life” (Sullivan and Delaney 2017, 848). Likewise, this interdependence of success and a higher power comes to a peak with the identification of “the company” as God. While not worshipping Arbonne, many women used the language of the prosperity gospel to describe their gratitude for the company “allowing” them to succeed, with references to their success as a “gift” alluding to the company being a “conduit for the Holy Spirit” that blesses its employees with capitalist success (Sullivan and Delaney 2017, 848). The feminist subject whom is created from the neoliberal-postfeminist-prosperity gospel nexus is a woman who empowers herself within the context of her traditional gender role, gives her God-given wealth to her family, and shares her



entrepreneurial “gift” with other woman in order to bring them to the company through what can be deemed a mode of corporate proselytization (Sullivan and Delaney 2017, 853). She as an individual has the power to “liberate” herself by entering the public sphere yet she must do so while remaining in the confines of both human patriarchs and the ultimate patriarch of God.

Likewise, the disputed conservative feminism also shares some of its roots in religious values. First, conservative feminism is perceived by many to be a threat to feminism due to its emphasis on traditional gender roles and gender hierarchy. A major aspect of conservative feminism is its emphasis on biological difference between sexes, prioritizing the nuclear family, and supporting traditional American social and political values. Liberal feminists see this as an egregious violation of feminist norms of justice and progress, while conservatives see this as a return to “authentic” feminism (Whitehead 2011, 5). According to Ronnee Schreiber in her piece “Is There a Conservative Feminism? An Empirical Account”, this “authentic” feminism is built on Pope John Paul II’s notions of the proper role of women in society (Schreiber 2018, 71). For example, the conservative politician Sarah Palin describes herself as a “tough gun-toting pioneering feminist” and calls for a “mom awakening” that will reclaim the traditional values of the family and ethos of the original “pioneer woman” who worked hard for her family and stood for American values (Gabriel Soares 2011, 62, 63, 68). Here, she draws on Puritanism as well as American exceptionalism, making the woman both the embodiment of the domestic mother as well as the protector of the American and Christian nation. This insistence on reclaiming a past version of “original” American values reflects a desire to cling to the notion that America is a godly nation that has been blessed enough to garner moral and political superiority over the rest of the world (Whitehead 2011, 7). In Palin’s conservative feminism, the woman is more of a symbol imbued with nationalism and religious significance rather than an individual.

Curiously, this treatment of the woman as a symbolic figure is reminiscent of sociologist Emile Durkheim's notion of the totem, where a totem is a symbol of "the sacred", or what is set apart from society, as well as "the clan", or the society itself (Durkheim 1912, 208). This has an intriguing resemblance to how women's occupation of the home represents the convergence of her symbolic embodiment of the private family (the sacred) and the Christian American nation (the clan). From this perspective, the conservative construction of feminism and womanhood is fully entrenched in a dense mixture of religious ideals and American nationalism.

However, despite Palin's enthusiasm, many conservative women who advocate on behalf of what they see as women's interests do not consider themselves feminists, but rather "humanists" or "women's advocates" (Nelson 2015). Depending on how one defines feminism, a conservative woman who advocates for what she sees as women's interests could be considered feminist, particularly with the individualist approach of third wave feminism. However, the conflict between conservatism and liberal understandings of progress have hindered conservative feminism from being embraced as a true form of feminism. While many abide by one form of feminism, feminism itself has no one definition; there are countless modes and modulations of feminist thought between political ideologies and within these ideologies themselves.

### *III. Case Studies*

In a survey of feminism in the US, I interviewed eight people on their views regarding feminism, religion, and work. Of the interviewees, each had a different relationship to religion:

Interviewee #1: Female, 20, ex-Catholic in a traditional Catholic conservative household

Interviewee #2: Female, 21, cultural Jew

Interviewee #3: Female, 50s, spiritual but not religious daughter of a Protestant United Methodist Church pastor

Interviewee #4: Female, 20, Lutheran daughter of two Lutheran pastors

Interviewee #5: Male, 20, "slightly" Methodist

Interviewee #6: Male, 50s, Mennonite

Interviewee #7: Female, 20, Catholic

Interviewee #8: Female, 20, “semi” Muslim

Each of these subjects identified as a feminist, and all had very liberal feminist tendencies. However, despite their common liberal feminist notions, the interviewees’ definitions of feminism were varied. For example, there is a division between those who defined feminism in terms of patriarchy and those who defined it in terms of equality. Interviewee #3 defined feminism as the goal to achieve a state where “folks are not oppressed based on their identity, particularly their gender”, taking into account patriarchy as well as its partner systems of oppression like racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Interviewee #2 also mentioned patriarchy, defining feminism as a “theory and methodology of fighting for living in a way that supports women in a patriarchal society”. However, none of the remaining interviewees mentioned patriarchy, and instead referred to equal rights and opportunities. Interestingly, Interviewee #4 initially defined feminism as equality between genders yet later corrected herself, saying that feminism is not an equality but equity between genders that leads to equal opportunities. Each other interviewee strictly defined feminism as gender equality. However, although Interviewee #6 defined feminism as equality between genders, he also was adamant about structural injustice and patriarchy as a multileveled system of power later in his responses. Similarly, Interviewee #4 did not use the term patriarchy in her interview, yet did reference the ubiquitous nature of oppression and male “toxicity” towards women. The liberal feminism notions of systemic justice and equal rights prevailed in these definitions of feminism.

#### *IV. Feminism, Religion, and Secularism*

There were varied responses to the questions regarding religion. Besides the “slightly” Methodist student, all of the Christians said their feminism is inspired by their religion. Interviewee #4, a Lutheran and child of two pastors, and Interviewee #6, a Mennonite, described

how religion is imbued in their everyday life and drives them to work for gender equality. Both brought up the Christian ideals of loving thy neighbor and humans being created in the image of God without hierarchy, and both said that the Bible is influenced by patriarchy but feel that this is not true Christianity. They also mentioned how they see Jesus as a radical activist who worked to upend oppressive systems, with Interviewee #6 saying his values “flow out of [his] beliefs in Jesus, who was a feminist”. These subjects, along with the Catholic Interviewee #7, see Christian values as inherently feminist, yet misinterpretation and the “human construct of the Church” have falsely imposed gender inequality and exclusionary policies on society (Interviewee #7).

The Jewish (#2), spiritual (#3), and “semi” Muslim (#8) subjects also related their religion to feminism, yet their feminism came from witnessing sexism within their religions rather than finding inherently feminist values. It is noteworthy that Interviewees #2 and #3, the only two subjects to mention patriarchy and systemic oppression in their definition of feminism, were also the only two subjects to explicitly discuss patriarchy and oppression in regards to how sexism within religious institutions influenced their relationship with religion. Interviewee #2 describes herself as “very Jewish” but in a more of cultural rather than spiritual manner. For her, being Jewish is central to all her beliefs and “influences her everyday life and perspectives”, and it is her religion which “put [her] on the path of activism”. She detailed how her experience growing up in a traditional conservative Jewish household gave her “a lot of opportunities as a woman to view the patriarchy, understand what it is, and either play my part on it or go against it and resist it.” After experiencing gender roles in her religion, she decided to continue to embrace Judaism yet resist the practices which she sees as patriarchal. For example, she no longer lights candles with her mother at Shabbat as the idea that women must light the candles as they are the foundation of the home conflicts with her feminist views. Similarly, Interviewee #8 spoke about

male dominance and traditional gender roles in Islam, where she feels “it’s kind of forced down our throats that men should be the breadwinners and women should not”. While she knows this may work for some, she personally does not agree with this model, and is instead motivated to break away from gender roles and advocate for choice when it comes to how one wants to structure family life. Interviewee #3 explained that she too experienced patriarchy in her family at a young age, as she saw that “humans brought to religious dogma assigned roles for men and women, and that drove me crazy.” As someone who is spiritual but not religious, she is against the institution of the church due to its history of oppression, yet like the Christian respondents she is inspired by Jesus’ radical actions and efforts to dismantle the system. Consequently, “stepping outside of organized religion helps [her] not exclude people based on their identity and engage people in the community in a radical love kind of way”. Her exit from institutionalized religion has enabled a type of spirituality that allows her community-based feminism to flourish.

Similar to how Baehr (2017) discusses the need for liberal feminist ideologies to have just “inner workings” as well as a just system, Interviewees #2 and #3 have identified injustices within the inner workings of their religions and worked to amend this. However, it is noteworthy that while Interviewee #2 stepped away from religion and towards spirituality in a characteristic liberal feminist opposition to the patriarchy of religion, Interviewee #3 embraced her religion despite her liberal feminist views on patriarchy. Both of these interviewees have molded their spiritual and religious beliefs to support their liberal feminist ideology in the way they see fit.

Conversely, Interviewee #1, the ex-Catholic student, gave a completely different perspective on religion and feminism. As she became less Catholic, she became more feminist. She contends that she used to accept the notion that “it’s okay for a father to control the daughter, ‘cause the father is man” because “when you believe in a religion you feel like you’re

given all the answers”. Now that she is less under the ideological control of her conservative Catholic family, her “views on feminism have changed because [she has] looked elsewhere for answers”. Most strikingly, she explains that before, “I expected myself to become a stay at home mother, but I don’t see that happening anymore”. While she does not devalue caregiving and is open to the idea of being a stay at home mother if that is where her life leads her, she no longer feels as if it is required. Instead, leaving religion has allowed her to embrace personal choice.

Similarly, there was a wide range of responses regarding whether feminism is secular or not. The two least religious subjects, Interviewee #1, an ex-Catholic, and Interviewee #5, who is “slightly” Methodist, both agreed that feminism and religion are separate. Interestingly, ex-Catholic Interviewee #1 and Catholic Interviewee #7 were the only two subjects to mention abortion, with Interviewee #1 saying feminism is secular because one cannot be religious and a feminist due to abortion issues, while Interviewee #7 said feminism is secular *except* for when it comes to women’s bodily autonomy issues. Interviewee #8 also referenced politics when answering this question, responding that feminism is secular but recognizing the debate within Islam over whether one can be a feminist. Conversely, Interviewee #2, the Jew, and Interviewee #6, the Mennonite, both expressed how religion is inseparable from all parts of their life, thus feminism cannot be secular because “human beings are not secular” (Interviewee #2). Interviewee #6 was the only subject to deconstruct the term “secular”, as he believes that there is “no separation between the sacred and the secular”; for him there is no divide between “private” religious life and public life, making secular a useless term. While some interviewees were adamant about the separation of feminism and religion, others were equally emphatic about the overlap of the two.

Interestingly, several subjects’ answers as to whether feminism is secular or not

contradicted with their explanation of how their religion influenced their values. For example, Interviewee #4 and Interviewee #7 both expressed that their religion naturally influences their life and values in a way where they do not even think about it as each is so connected, including when it comes to feminism. However, while recognizing the intersections between religious identity and feminist identity to some extent when it comes to politics, they also ultimately decided that feminism is secular. This is striking, and perhaps is a result of the liberal feminist insistence that feminism is a completely secular movement. Interviewee #3, who represented one of the most liberal feminist standpoints, expressed this thought exactly, saying that feminist leaders like to think that feminism is secular, but for some people feminism is rooted in religious values in such a way that it may seem secular because of how normalized Christian-American values are. Feminism and religion is a contentious topic among American feminists today, and even within liberal feminism alone there is an array of strong opinions on the matter. The religious community cannot be homogenized.

#### *V. Feminism, Religion, and Work*

When it came to work-life balance, a major theme across all of the interviews was choice. There was a strong tendency to lean in to third wave feminist individualism, as every subject responded along the lines of “this is my opinion on this issue, but it is a choice” to at least one question. There were no religious, gendered, political or generational lines drawn regarding the emphasis on choice. For example, no one believed in the “authentic” feminism conservatives often mention. In fact, Interviewee #7, a Republican and the least left-leaning of the group, said that it is “the opposite of feminism to tell another woman their sense of empowerment is wrong.” Moreover, when it came to the question of how breadwinning should be structured in a family, every respondent agreed that they do not personally believe there should be one breadwinner in a

family but if that is what a family prefers then that is not an issue. Further, when it came to the question of work-life balance and what to prioritize, each person who gave a response on which they prioritized emphasized that this is what worked for them individually. Consequently, the respondents did not place more value on either breadwinning or caregiving in the general sense; those who valued one over the other were expressing personal opinions, not blanket statements about how society should be. However, there was a compelling dualism of individualism and an all-encompassing desire for inclusivity. Even of the interviewees who did not refer to systemic justice, everyone generally tended to speak in broad, overarching terms that drew on inclusivity, such as defining feminism as equality of “all genders” or mentioning women of other cultures. This universalism and transnationalism is striking when juxtaposed with the strong desire for individual choice. It seems that these feminists’ view on individualism is not the neoliberal “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality but an individualism predicated on a desire for inclusivity, so that all avenues for one’s personal mode of feminism and liberation are valued.

In striking contrast to the conservative feminist view on religion when it comes to work-life balance and gender roles, none of the respondents said that religion informs their opinion on gender roles or work-life balance. Instead, opinions on breadwinning and caregiving were varied. When asked about her opinions on work-life balance and what should be prioritized in this balance, Interviewee #2 was the only subject to express disillusionment with the idea of balance. She believes that it is “quite unachievable in today’s society, in most businesses, for women to be a mother and have a career; they’re really forced to choose”, and that this is why men are able to gain so much power. For her, “having it all” in the neoliberal sense is not an option with the current structure of the workplace, as Anne-Marie Slaughter argues in her book *Unfinished Business*. However, Interviewee #2 does believe that the pandemic is proving that women “can



do it all” and that she believes it will lead to changes in the workplace that could facilitate more potential for women to be mothers and professionals. Conversely, Interviewee #4 aspires to “have it all”, stating “I would like to think that there’s a way to have a fulfilling career and a fulfilling home life.” However, a key theme in her answer is “fulfillment”. Here, it seems more that “having it all” is not just a work-life balance but a happy work-life balance, which aligns with Rottenberg’s argument that there has been a neoliberal shift towards a focus on a happiness. In fact, every interviewee mentioned contentedness, happiness, or fulfillment at least once. In striking contrast to the Sheryl Sandberg “lean in” emphasis on finding success and progress through professional achievements, when asked to give their personal definitions of success and progress, every interviewee referred to happiness, with Interviewee #8 even explicitly stating that “your job or relationship does not define your success, it’s about reaching your personal goals and how happy you are”. “Reaching goals” in this sense is not about becoming a career woman or a perfect mother, but whatever makes the individual person happy.

Moreover, there was a divide on how each person seemed to locate their happiness when it came to work-life balance. This divide did not occur across any religious, generational, or political lines, yet the group was split between those who expressed a strong preference for family life versus those who were mostly ambivalent or unsure about what aspects of a work-life balance they would prioritize. For example, Interviewees #5 the “slightly Methodist” male student, #6 the Mennonite male Gen-X adult, and #7 the Catholic female student, all were emphatic about their personal opinion that home life is more important than work life. Curiously, Interviewee #5 said that prioritizing work life and breadwinning may “paradoxically” be a way of prioritizing home life and caregiving if that is what is necessary to care for one’s family, while Interviewee #6 asserted that he would never take a job that required him to be away from his

children. It was noteworthy that the men interviewed, both younger and older, were certain that they personally value family life and caregiving over breadwinning. This is quite the contradiction from *Sex Matters* author Mona Charen's view of the roles of biological sexes and the natural inclination of men to be breadwinners and women to be caregivers. However, more in line with Charen, Interviewee #7 mentioned that family life is very important to her, and that she is setting up her life in order to prepare for being a stay at home mom while her children are young, citing her decision to go to graduate school instead of medical school as an example of how she is shaping her lifestyle choices to fit her desire for motherhood. Again, each person expressed that this is not what people "should" do but what they prefer. It is also important to note that this preference for caregiving did not come with a devaluation of breadwinning; these interviewees desire a fulfilling career in addition to a fulfilling family life.

Conversely, other interviewees were neutral on this question, with the strongest contrary opinion coming from Interviewee #4 who explained that "right now I can't imagine dropping my career and professional aspirations for my family but maybe it's because I have never had kids so I don't know what it's like". Furthermore, Interviewee #3, the Gen-X woman, mentioned prioritizing family later in life. Again, this is out of a desire for personal happiness, as she explained that she finds herself wanting to spend more time at home as she gets older in order to express new parts of herself and grow as a person; for her it is not about "taking care of others".

On the other hand, when asked if they felt pressured to focus on either home life or work life, there was a resounding agreement amongst the interviewees that the pressure was on work life. All of the interviewees except Interviewee #7, who feels no pressure, and #3, who feels pressure in both realms, stated that they primarily feel pressure in their work life. The five students who said this referred to their parents' expectations, with Interviewee #8 even stating

that her parents pressure her to stay out of a relationship until she has a career. Interviewee #3 described how pressures depend on the day; the unpredictability of motherhood brings unexpected family issues, yet the challenges of situations such as the pandemic demand a lot from her work. Furthermore, both Interviewees #1 and #6 referred to the pressure on work life coming from financial strain, with Interviewee #1 citing her lower class status as a key reason for why she is so focused on gaining financial stability and how she does not have the same choices as other women, something which Slaughter discussed in *Unfinished Business*. These subjects did not express that this pressure has made them value breadwinning over caregiving, or even that the pressure was to “breadwin”. Rather, it seems that the pressure is tied to either external expectations to achieve success or the drive for personal financial stability; the traditional notion of feeling pressure to earn money to support a family was not present.

However, Interviewees #2, #4, and #6 also mentioned the internalization of pressures. Interviewee #2, who is from a conservative family, said while she feels pressured to focus on work now, as she gets older she will feel pressure to focus on caregiving and carry on the Jewish tradition, yet this is “just an internalization of what society is telling [her]”. This is a fascinating contrast between the conservative feminist desire to pass on cultural values through women that Gabriel Soares (2011) and Whitehead (2011) discussed and the liberal feminist emphasis on unjust coercive power that Baehr (2017) discussed. Along similar lines, Interviewee #4 felt that the pressure to focus on her work life is only her putting pressure on herself, and Interviewee #6 mentioned that he believes women must be freed from “internalized feelings of subordination”. While these subjects all mentioned internalization, it was not so much in a neoliberal manner; none of them spoke of deficient mindsets or a lack of confidence. While Interviewee #6’s answer may seem reminiscent of Sandberg, his response was against the backdrop of his comments on

structural injustice and the need for feminism to reject the accumulation of power in the hands of the patriarchy and redistribute this power equally throughout society. The liberal feminist ethos of these interviews prevailed even during the typically neoliberal discussion on internalization.

Additionally, Interviewee #1 stated that she believes religion plays a significant role in organizational and workplace culture, which could relate to the pressure people feel to prioritize work life. While she and several other interviewees stated that religion should not play an explicit role in the workplace beyond internal personal values, she felt that the culture of the workplace is imbued with religion, particularly with an ethos of “complete devotion, the spirit of ‘idle hands are a devil’s playground’, and a holy work ethic”. She also felt that the culture of complete submission to one’s boss is a remnant of the Abrahamic emphasis on submission to God and respecting one’s parents. This directly relates to Sullivan and Delaney’s work with the prosperity gospel at Arbonne, and reflects the way in which American “secular” norms are infused with Christian values. Similarly, she described the way her conservative family venerates religious values yet is not overtly religious. She cites how she feels she is expected to marry a man and take up a “feminine” job like teaching, and how her parents have an almost God-like, infallible authority simply because they are her parents. Despite her lack of religion, Interviewee #1 finds that religion still holds power over her life, even in the “secular” realm of work.

## *VI. Policy Recommendations and Conclusion*

As these interviewees were liberal feminists, their ideas reflect a desire for systemic change and government involvement in gender issues. There is a strong opposition to the market-based neoliberal approach, and a general discontent with capitalism in general amongst those I interviewed. As evidenced by the calls for inclusion and the acceptance of all personal choices when it comes to feminism, a community-based approach that includes race and class based

justice is valued over an individualist approach. ERA style policies that stress legal equality, such as stricter enforcement of the Equal Pay Act, would be an important first step in achieving liberal justice, and is desired by several of the interviewees who defined feminism in terms of equality. The next step would be systemic changes that include race and class-based approaches. Instead of policies which encourage predatory military recruitment tactics in low income and non-white communities, increased funding for under-resourced schools in these communities would provide more avenues for choice when it comes to work and family life. In this sample of American feminists, a longing for justice triumphs free market individualism.

Furthermore, in light of the several interviewees who value family life over work life and the interviewees who mentioned class as a serious issue in their work-life balance, liberal policies which make caregiving more financially feasible would be welcomed. More socialized policies such as universal healthcare, increased family leave for both men and women, and subsidized childcare would achieve both goals of introducing systemic change and reducing financial stress on caregivers. Moreover, all of my interviewees either are married and have kids, want to get married and have kids, or expressed that they would like to get married and have kids if “that’s how the wind blows”. Evidently, caregiving and family life is still a crucial component of American lives across gender, politics, religion, and generations. Policies which shift even slightly away from the extreme focus on breadwinning and the market and instead make caregiving fit better into society’s systems will accommodate these desires, such as workplace policies which make it clear that breastfeeding is permitted at work. This shift could also possibly lessen the heavy pressure that the interviewees feel to focus on their work life.

The desire for radical change is also evidenced in the comments several interviewees made regarding the nature of religious values in “secular” American spaces, such as the

workplace. While interviewees expressed that religion should not have an explicit role in the workplace beyond personal values, it would not be advisable for the President to outright ban all religious expression in the workplace, like with France's ban on religious clothing in schools. This would be in serious conflict with the universal theme of choice and individual expression that was captured in all eight of the interviews. Instead, it may be advisable to have workplace policies which limit the explicit references to religion in "secular" spaces that have been normalized, such as removing language that refers to God from workplaces that are not religious organizations, or attempting to dispel the notion that all Americans are Christians by decentering Christian holidays. This would likely be a contentious issue that the federal government could not pass policy on, but perhaps local governance could make change here.

The only conflict with these policy approaches as represented in these interviews may be with Interviewee #7, the Catholic Republican student, who would not agree with policies as far left as the other interviewees. While she too had liberal feminist tendencies regarding her opinions on institutionalized sexism, she also expressed that at least when it comes to the Church she tends to accept the status quo despite her opposition to it, as she feels it is not going to change any time soon. This does reflect an important aspect of U.S. politics and a prominent view among many. Capitalism and the market-based approach is so ingrained in U.S. culture that a radical shift away from this would be difficult. Such an extreme move towards socialized policies would be arduous to accomplish in the current political climate. However, it is clear from these interviews that there is a large population of people, from both the younger and older generation, that is looking for large scale, systemic change. Consequently, a continued market-based approach to gender issues is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term. Therefore, instead of jumping straight into radical policy changes, it is most advisable to work on encouraging

small scale change within families and communities. As liberal feminists argue, the first step to a just society is just “inner workings” (Baehr 2017, 2). By building feminist family structures, whatever that may mean for each family, society as a whole will move closer to having a feminist infrastructure, and these now seemingly radical policy changes may become feasible. For the liberal feminists of these interviews, that likely means having an equal distribution of income and caregiving responsibilities between partners, and deconstructing gender roles. By fostering feminist justice within the family, feminist justice within American society will seem less like an impossible dream and more of a challenging yet attainable project.

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Interviews:

Interviewee #1: Female, 20, ex-Catholic in a traditional Catholic conservative household.

Interview over zoom.

Interviewee #2: Female, 21, cultural Jew. Interview in person.

Interviewee #3: Female, 50s, spiritual but not religious daughter of a Protestant United Methodist Church pastor. Interview in person.

Interviewee #4: Female, 20, Lutheran daughter of two Lutheran pastors. Interview over zoom.

Interviewee #5: Male, 20, “slightly” Methodist. Interview over zoom.

Interviewee #6, Male, 50s, Mennonite. Interview in person.

Interviewee #7: Female, 20, Catholic. Interview in person.

Interviewee #8: Female, 20, “semi” Muslim. Interview over phone.

Interview questions:

1. How do you define feminism? Do you think there is an “authentic” feminism?
2. Are you a feminist?
3. Are you religious? If so, what religion? If not, were you raised in a religious household?
  - i. How does your religion (or lack of religion) influence your values?
  - ii. How do your religious (or non-religious) beliefs inform your view on feminism?
  - iii. Do your religious (or non-religious) beliefs influence the way you perceive your gender role or others’?
4. Do you want to get married/Are you married? Do you want to have kids/Do you have kids?
5. What is your opinion on work-life balance? What do you think should be prioritized in this balance?
6. Do you feel pressured to focus on either your work life or home life?
7. What does success mean to you, personally?
8. Would you consider yourself successful in your work? If so, how did you become successful? If not, what do you think has prevented your success? \*
9. Do you think families should have one main breadwinner, or should breadwinning responsibilities be divided?
10. What does progress mean to you?
11. How would you define liberation for women?
12. What do you think is the role of religion in the workplace? Do you think religion influences your own work? Or others’ work?
13. Do you think feminism is secular?

*\*only asked to Gen-X interviewees*