

Feminist Family Values

Envisioning a Family-Friendly Future, One Household at a Time



by SUSAN WEIDMAN SCHNEIDER

One of our first responsibilities to ourselves, to our daughters, and to our future in this election season is to turn on our internal GPS when we hear the word “family” bandied about by politicians of every stripe. Generic rhetoric about “families” — as in “Rising food prices will cause families to suffer” — obliterates individuals, a disservice to each of the persons affected as well as to our communities.

Seeing “family values” through a feminist lens means valuing both the many different kinds of families *and* the individuals within them. Genuine family values are indistinguishable from the vision we have, as feminists and as Jews, for a better world. Feminism is all about choices and about improving the world. *Feminism* is a family value.

The “classic” nuclear family — two parents, male and female, and their biological offspring — represents only a small fraction of today’s households. When we speak of families, including Jewish families, we’ve got to see in our mind’s eye the myriad ways family identity is now forged. Today, we may live in households that are single-parent, gay, lesbian, interfaith, international, interracial, intergenerational, and even — increasingly — single-person, not to mention families of long-term companions, adopted children, or half-siblings. We don’t have to look far to see that real people form real families of almost every imaginable configuration. Our feminist family values acknowledge and welcome this diversity.

And then there’s marriage. A whole spate of research shows that the happiest marriages are those in which there is greatest parity between the partners. Makes perfect sense. When the spouses are earning at par and have fairly equal educations, there’s less strife over which partner has the greater value, whose time is worth more, which one can “afford” to take time off work to accompany a child to a game or an elderly relative to the doctor. Yet feminist gains and feminist family values can be undone by our own outdated language. Don’t you still sometimes hear a parent

mention that a father was “babysitting” his own children? Yikes! Do we say a *mother* is babysitting? Fascinatingly, several recent studies have found that gay unions have more relationship satisfaction, because

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some of the inequality in opposite-sex relationships is missing.

Feminist family values have to take into account the microeconomics of marriage. In many heterosexual couples, the man is still earning more, despite decades of women’s-movement work on pay equity issues, so it’s urgent that we recognize the value of unpaid work. Some women, if they take time out of the paid labor force to raise children, make sure that the family budget includes a mechanism for keeping up *her* 401(k) payments and other perks of paid employment that will ease her re-entry into the workforce down the line. Other couples find other ways to recognize and reward the huge contributions — and often sacrifices — of the stay-at-home parent.

Economic protection in our homes is only one part of acting on our values. Without physical and emotional safety, no family is secure. Too obvious to state this? Obvious maybe, but child abuse and violence against women persist — sowing the seeds for similar behavior through the generations. Children who are

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victims of sexual or physical abuse — or who witness such abuse — are far more likely than others to grow up to be abusers, and even if they're spared this fate, new studies show that they're at great risk for a range of debilitating psychological disorders in adulthood. When lawmakers and clergy take action against abusers, they're also expressing those feminist family values.

It's a feminist value to take responsibility for shaping the next generation and honoring our elders. It's time to acknowledge the often unpaid work of caregiving in families, whether for children or parents. Acting on this value, we need to press for legislation that acknowledges the work of people taking care of family members. Other countries — like Canada — provide up to a year's parental leave, at nearly full pay, for a father or mother of a new child, biological or adopted. Other kinds of family leave include time off to care for elderly or ill relatives. While US legislation catches up with our values, we ought to be pressing Jewish institutions to be models for such compassionate and family-friendly policies. Women and men working in Jewish organizations, for example, are surprised and delighted when they find out that paid parental leave is part of their benefits package. Unfortunately, the surprise is too often in the other direction — even at agencies that tout the importance of Jewish continuity and family life.

In many two-parent households, income from both adults is needed to keep the family afloat. Ask around, and you'll see how vigorously we still have to lobby employers to offer flex-time, or job-sharing, or fewer evening meetings, so that people can be both workers and parents without shredding themselves to pieces. There's good news from workplaces that demonstrate that they value families and the parent-employees who support them: lactation rooms and on-premises nurseries, for example. Such office perks, unfortunately, are available only to the privileged few. For many millions of others, what would help the most is legislation to raise the poverty level, so that people — yes, families — teetering on the brink of poverty can take advantage of the kinds of government benefits that help children escape a cycle of poverty and help their families survive.

Family-friendly employee benefits don't stop at the office. Employers who hire household help can be part of the solution, not the problem. Feminist values — like human values — mean ensuring that nannies, housekeepers, and other household workers are remunerated and treated fairly. After all, paid caregivers have families to support, too. Fair wages, delineated hours and responsibilities, paid sick days, vacation time, and Social Security payments are all part of being a responsible employer. Those who cast aside these fair practices help sustain what Katha Pollitt has called “patriarchy lite.”

What goes on under our own roofs is what women talk about most when we speak frankly among ourselves. But we don't shape our lives in a vacuum. Public policy plays a role in family happiness; just look at the number of long-term gay and lesbian partners who can now be legally married, thanks to state legislation like that enacted in California this June. Other legislation, like equal pay for work of comparable value, an early feminist goal, still presents challenges. Despite the passage of anti-discrimination legislation, educated women in traditionally female fields (the usual: teaching, social work, nursing) are not valued as much as their counterparts in other professions. Ensuring that this urgent and under-remunerated work is rewarded with benefits and higher wages is yet another important way that we can express our feminist values.

Let this be the season when feminist family values prevail, in homes and in the workplace, in the courts and in our language, in our lives and on the ballot. ☞

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Illustrator/Brian Cronin