

The Calculus of the 1960s: Compromises Denied

Throughout history, women have been considered the weaker sex. Although women have reached new heights today in their fight for a higher social status, they are still undervalued in many aspects. One of the leading problems that women have today is the lack of a middle ground. No matter how many feminist movements occur, one thing always remains: the narrow-minded ideologies of society as a whole. There is a very fine line between how society expects women to present themselves and how they are expected to act. Today, women are expected to be sexy yet remain pure. The media especially emphasizes these expectations. The 1960s presented a similar situation for women where traditional gender roles continued to be reinforced. Traditional expectations defined women's economic standing in society as well. The issues women were fighting for such as equality in marriage, access to birth control, and the abolishment of discrimination and sexual harassment within the workforce all establish the idea of how women had no room for compromises.

The 1960s provided the atmosphere for the second wave of feminism. Works such as *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir and *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan further encouraged this movement (Women's Rights Movement). Cultural changes were redefining the role of the American woman but only to an extent. Even though many women broke through the no-work-outside-of-the-home barrier after World War II, their primary obligation was still the cooking, cleaning, and childrearing expected of the ordinary housewife. By this time in history, men still agreed with traditional gender roles, however, they wanted their wives to work jobs as well. More people working meant more money to pay the bills. By the 1970s, about 43% of women were working (Engemann). Women successfully obtained the middle ground that they initially sought, being able to both work and take care of their kids.

This compromise though became quite unsatisfying. Women became sick and tired of coming home after a long day of work and then, being expected to cook a full meal, do the laundry, take care of the kids, and more. They believed that marriage is a partnership and so their next step in the feminist movement involved fighting for that equality within marriage. They wanted their husbands to share the responsibility of raising the kids as well as maintaining the household instead of every chore being left up to the woman of the house. A study in 1970 showed that men with working wives spent only 1.4 hours a week more on household chores compared to those who had full time housewives (Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia). Eventually, cultural changes led to fathers spending more time with their children, which gave women more equality when it came to child-rearing.

Some personal issues women fought for included their freedom of choice to use birth control as well as obtain an abortion. Conservative forces believed that contraception went against our primary purpose to reproduce and felt that it encouraged teenagers to engage in sexual activity. The government refused to recognize women as free to take control of their own bodies until the 1960s, when birth control became a reproductive right for women (Birth Control). The 1960s popularized methods of contraception such as the birth control pill, contraceptive sterilization, and condoms. The Supreme Court dissolved state laws banning the use of contraception in *Griswold vs. Connecticut* in 1965 (CDC). Unfortunately, this case focused on married couples, therefore, not every woman had legal access to birth control until the 1970s. Married couples not ready to raise a family had more control over their sex lives and the average family went from raising four kids to two. In 1973, women's right to abortion also became legal through *Roe vs. Wade* (Birth Control).

Women fought for these rights because ultimately, they were still being blamed for pregnancy before marriage. By this time, teenage girls went out on dates, but society didn't

negatively label them as “sluts” until they became pregnant. The only way to prevent pregnancy involved being given the right to control their own reproductive system instead of the government. After all, the government wasn’t going to help them with childcare if they did get pregnant, especially since illegitimate children faced more discrimination. Besides, it wasn’t only couples that used contraception to prevent pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. Single women unable to financially support children used contraception as well. Denied access to birth control in the past erased the middle ground it made possible for women of pleasure without pregnancy. By 1978, 71% of women practiced safe sex (CDC). However, there was an increase in illegitimate children in the mid-1960s. Some people blame this increase on the popularized use of birth control and increased welfare benefits to single mothers, because these causes promoted sex before marriage (Kopel). Nonetheless, women were now able to enjoy their sex lives without worrying about pregnancy.

Aside from personal issues, women fought against discrimination in the work force. Males were paid higher wages than women for the same amount and type of work. Many women remained housewives, but those who continued to work outside of the home after World War II were paid only sixty percent of the male wage (Walsh). This huge wage gap for the same type of work was completely unfair to women. Jobs were often separated into categories such as male and female jobs. Female jobs offered a considerably lower salary. Women usually received jobs as teachers, clerks, and secretaries, sometimes even with higher education. Other times, they got jobs that involved cleaning, cooking, or sewing. In short, they were only offered jobs of the feminine type. Women wanted to work and continue being independent but the wage gap interfered with them making a decent living. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 apparently “prohibits sex-based wage discrimination between men and women in the same establishment who perform jobs that require substantially equal skill, effort, and responsibility under similar working

conditions,” but women in the 1970s still found themselves being paid about forty five percent less than their male counterparts (EPA).

In addition, there was also discrimination in the work place based on being married. 34% of the women in the labor force in the 1970s were married (Engemann). Job interviews discreetly asked women whether they were married and if so, they had a lower chance of getting hired. Employers usually refused to hire married women, because they weren’t considered reliable workers since an emergency dealing with their kids or maternity leaves could come up. In the end, it always came down to the myth that a woman needs a man for support and survival. Women had to unjustly compromise their desire to remain independent with a lower salary.

Another problem they dealt with was sexual harassment. They refused to be abused. There weren’t proper laws established concerning the safety of women. Rape wasn’t as serious a charge as it is today. If women were wearing certain types of clothes and they were raped, when they went to report it, they weren’t taken seriously, because apparently, the way they dressed showed that they were asking to be raped. As ridiculous as it sounds, a little make-up on could have also been misunderstood as asking to be raped.

Furthermore, male employers back then definitely could get away with crude sexual comments towards their female employees as well as feeling them up. Women were expected to be pretty and accessible, yet if they gave in to their male acquaintances, they were the ones blamed for being sexually harassed or raped, because theoretically, women shouldn’t get horny, but it’s totally understandable if men are caught promoting such behavior, because it’s in their nature. Again, there was no middle ground here for women. They were either pretty and pure or slutty skanks. Even prostitutes were discriminated against because if they were caught doing business, only the female prostitute was arrested as if the male was absolutely innocent and was forced by the big, bad prostitute into sleeping with her. Women were often neglected in cases of

sexual harassment while men were made out to be the victims, therefore women found it difficult to freely make decisions about their everyday personal matters such as what kind of clothes to wear or how to act around their employers. This type of discrimination inspired women to rethink whether they've truly received equality once they earned the right to vote in 1920.

The "no middle ground" aspect in women's lives has been a distressing situation since the earliest of times. The feud between traditional and modern values in society brought women quite a challenge when it came to being themselves. Past progressive feminist movements helped pave the way for new ideals, but the issues women were fighting for in the 1960s like marital equality, a right to birth control, and an end to discrimination as well as sexual harassment in the workplace said otherwise. Their fight proved how women still weren't on equal terms with men. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which helped protect the rights of minorities such as the freedom to vote, to work, and to use public places included women (Teasley). Therefore, under U.S law, women are technically considered a minority. It's insulting enough when different races are labeled U.S. minorities, but when women, who make up half of this country's population are considered a minority, it's a wonder how this ongoing battle of the sexes hasn't turned into a full-fledged war.