

THE CRISIS
IN WOMEN'S IDENTITY
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It Changed My Life: Writings on the
Women's Movement
"The Crisis in Women's Identity"
by Betty Friedan
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I am delighted to be here. Women all over this country are on the verge of completing the massive delayed revolution that needs to be won for women. It is a delayed revolution because all the rights that would make women free and equal citizens of this country, persons able to develop to their full potential in society, were won on paper long ago. The last of these rights, the right to vote, was won the year before I was born. But we are not really free and equal if the feminine mystique keeps us from freely using our rights; if the only world we really are free to move in is the so-called woman's world of home; if we are asked to make an unreal choice no man is ever asked to make; if we think, as girls, that we have to choose somehow between love, marriage and motherhood and the chance to devote ourselves seriously to some challenge, some interest that would enable us to grow to our full human potential.

Are we really free and equal if we are forced to make such a choice, or half-choice, because of lack of support from our society—because we have not received simple institutional help in combining marriage and motherhood with work in the professions, politics, or any of the other frontiers beyond the home? If girls today still have no image of themselves as individual human beings, if they think their only road to status, to identity, in society is to grab that man—according to all the images of marriage from the ads, the television commercials, the movies, the situation comedies, and all the experts who counsel them—and if therefore they think they must catch him at nineteen and begin to have babies and that split-level dream house so soon that they never have time to make other choices, to take other active moves in society, to risk themselves in trial-and-error efforts, are they, are we, really free and equal? Are we confined by that simple age-old destiny that depends only on our sexual biology and chance, or do we actually have the freedom of choice that is open to us as women today in America?

I say that the only thing that stands in women's way today is this false image, this feminine mystique, and the self-denigration of women that it perpetuates. This mystique makes us try to beat ourselves down in order to be feminine, makes us deny or feel freakish about our own abilities as people. It keeps us from moving freely on the road that is open to us. It keeps us from recognizing and solving the small, but real problems that remain.

Whether you know it or not, you have—in your own lives, in your own persons—moved beyond this false image. You yourselves deny the feminine mystique; you deny the very images of women that come at you from all sides. There are no heroines today in

America, not as far as the public image is concerned. There are sex objects and there are drudges. We see this on television every day.

You here, however, are the new image of women: as person, as heroine. You live actively in society. You are not solely dependent on your husbands and your children for your identity. You do not live your life vicariously through them. You do not wail passively for that wise man to make the decisions that will shape your society, but move in and help shape society yourself, and begin to make it a more human world. You bridge that old, obsolete division that splits life into man's world of thought and action and woman's world of love. With little help from society, you have begun to make a new pattern in which marriage, motherhood, homemaking--the traditional roles of women—are merged with the possibility of women as individuals, as decision-makers, as creators of the future.

But because of the feminine mystique, you have not felt fully free and confident even as you have moved on this road. You have felt guilty; you have endured jeers; sneers, snickers, perhaps not from your own husband—who, I suspect, supports you more than the image would admit—but from the image-makers, and perhaps from your less adventurous neighbors, who are less willing to assume the role of heroine.

Your presence here today, however, is a testament to the fact that you are beginning to become conscious of the task that is before you. You are beginning to become conscious of the moment in history in which you stand, and this consciousness is what we need now.

Someone said to me in St. Louis that I wasn't actually telling women to do anything new, that I was only helping to make them conscious of the road on which they were already moving. I would accept this. I think we must become conscious of it in order to finish the job. Otherwise we keep repealing over and over again the same arguments with ourselves, the same conflicts, the same decisions, instead of moving ahead and facing the new problems that need to be solved, and asking, in voices loud enough to be heard, for what we need from society. We do not know how strong we could be if we affirmed ourselves as women and joined together, instead of each woman feeling freakish and isolated, as if no one else but herself had the brains and the courage to look beyond that young peak of marriage and childbirth that the feminine mystique enshrines.

You know that you have brains as well as breasts, and you use them. You know what you are capable of, but you could use it for yourselves and for other women with so much more freedom if you could only break through those self-denigrating blocks. It is not laws, nor great obstacles, nor the heels of men that are grinding women down in America today. Men as well as women are victims of the feminine mystique. We must simply break through this curtain in the minds of women in order to get on with the massive delayed revolution. And there are massive numbers of us, if we stop to realize how many of us have already moved beyond the feminine mystique and how many more are ready to move.

I am speaking not only of the women who work outside the home in industry, but of every woman who works in society, for they all have made a certain advance from the isolation of household drudgery. Unfortunately, far too many women are taking jobs too soon in order to put their husbands through law, engineering, graduate or theological school, because these women do not take themselves and their own abilities seriously enough to put themselves through schools. Consequently, too many women of the one of-

three who work outside the home are concentrating on the housework jobs of industry—which are going to be replaced by the machine, anyway, just as much of the drudgery of our housework at home has been replaced by the machine. Even more of this household drudgery could be done by machines if the massive resources of American technology were devoted to it, instead of to selling women things they do not need and convincing them that running the washing machine is as creative, scientific and challenging as solving the genetic code.

All of these women in industry housework, however, are now in a position, with the proper training, to move ahead to the kinds of work that cannot be replaced by the machine. With them in the massive revolution are the great numbers of women who engage in volunteer community leadership, work that requires a great deal of human strength, thought and initiative. To a certain extent, their work is often more in tune with the rapid change in our society than that of the existing professions. Committed, innovative volunteer work is done almost completely by women in America, and thus is not recognized for what it is by our society. Therefore, by sneaking around the corner, it manages to innovate in ways that the conformity, the resistance to change, structured into the existing professions does not permit.

I think, however, if we break through that denigrating image of women enshrined in the feminine mystique and take ourselves seriously, society may begin to take us seriously. The disparagement of volunteer work in America will stop, and the false line between the professional and the volunteer will be redrawn. As it is, professionals have such a low opinion of the woman volunteer that they dream up work to keep her busy, use her far below her own ability merely to raise money or hold teas or lick envelopes—or they break the jobs up into little segments that someone with even a small IQ could do. And yet we hear that they cannot find the professionals that they need to solve the social problems in the community, and that there aren't enough trained group workers to do what needs to be done in the hospitals, the schools, and the health and welfare agencies.

If all the volunteers resigned tomorrow, much of this work, not all, would still have to be done, but it might be done with a more serious use of women's real abilities.

I would add also to the massiveness of this revolution the great numbers of women who are doing the housework of politics, who, trapped in the feminine mystique, acquiesce merely to lick envelopes, take nominal posts in ladies' aid auxiliaries, collect furniture for auctions, and second nominating speeches. Freed from their self-denigration, however, they could hold policy-making positions, run for the county committee, serve on the town committee, run for the state Senate or Congress, go to law school and become a judge, or even run for Vice President. I won't say President, for I think that may be premature, but it might help the revolution if a woman had enough courage to try. Above all, women in America need higher aspirations in politics. We know more than we think we know politically, and we are not using this knowledge.

Of all the passions open to man and woman, politics is the one that a woman can most easily embrace and move ahead in, creating a new pattern of politics, marriage and motherhood. Only self-denigration stops women in politics.

In addition, there are the great number of women who could be artists, who are artists but do not take themselves seriously as such. In *The New York Times* recently, there were some interesting figures that showed an enormous increase in the number of Americans who answered "Artist" on the census blank, who defined themselves

professionally as painters, sculptors, art teachers, writers, poets, playwrights, television writers, all the rest. This great increase was almost completely made up of men. All that keeps a woman of talent from being an artist is her false image of herself, the fear of making the commitment to discipline herself—and of being tested. She doesn't even run across the problems that an American woman has, say, in wanting to become a physicist. Even if as a young girl she does not absorb the notion that physics is unfeminine, she may find it hard to want to have children and go to the physics laboratory at the same time. However, you can paint at home. It is only for lack of taking herself seriously that a woman who paints does not become an artist—or that a woman who wants to become a physicist doesn't work out some sort of accommodation for both children and a career.

I also add to the massive, delayed revolution many of the young women who fell hook, line and sinker for the feminine mystique, used it as a rationalization for evading their own choices, and married early. They thought that all they had to do was to get that man at nineteen and that would take care of the rest of their life, and then they woke up at twenty-five or thirty-five or forty-five with the four children, the house and the husband, and realized they had to face a future ahead in which they would not be able to live through others. Such a woman, whose children are already moving out the door, finally asks herself what she is going to do with her life, and begins, even if late, to face and make some choices of her own. These great numbers of women are now trying to go back to college to get the education they gave up too easily and too soon, and they are getting more or less—too often less—a helping hand from the educators. Some of the universities are braving through formal barriers and helping these women to grow to their full potential by admitting them to part-time college or graduate work—since part-time study is usually the only answer today for a woman who is still responsible for small children. Some universities may even provide part-time nursery schools so that women may continue to study even during those years; in this way they will not emerge as displaced people when their last child goes off to school, and they will not have to contribute to the population explosion by having baby after baby for lack of anything else creative to do. Perhaps the colleges and universities will even begin to be a little less rigid and understand that a woman who has had the strength to innovate in the community—who has led in solving new problems in education, politics, mental health, and in all the other problems that women have worked on in their suburbs and cities in recent years—may have learned something that is the equivalent of an academic thesis.

Finally, there are the great numbers of young girls for whom, thank heaven, the choices are still ahead. If they only see through the false image, they can so easily make the little choices—not the fake big ones such as marriage versus career, but the little ones—that, if made all along, will easily create a new image of woman. And even if their choices involve effort, work, a few conflicts and problems that have to be solved, these are easier problems than that desperate emptiness a woman faces at thirty-five or forty after she realizes that all her life cannot be lived in lifelong full-time motherhood. These young girls can decide in high school "I would like to be a physicist, I would like to be a teacher, I would like to be a nurse, I would like to be an astronaut." Not "What do you want to be, little girl?" "I would like to be a mommy." "What do you want to be, little boy?" "I would like to be a cowboy." Of course he is going to be a husband and father; of course she is going to be a wife and mother. But the choices she must make in school are to learn what else she can be and do herself, because if she does not make these choices

when she is young, she will not even try to do the work, to make the effort that will take her to our new frontiers.

Of course, if the revolution is going to be so massive, there is going to be resistance to it. In the last year or so, the problem of women in America has been put on the table. The President's Commission on the Status of Women has made its report. My book and others like it have stimulated discussions among women who have too long suppressed their own aspirations as people, and we are beginning to see some resistance.

There was a story in the New Yorker a few months ago called "An Educated American Woman," by John Cheever. It was about an educated woman who fought a zoning battle in her neighborhood, who was taking a French course at Columbia and who was writing a book. She was punished. The baby-sitter left her child alone and he died. Her husband left her for a motherly woman. No more education, no more zoning battles, and, heaven forbid, no more books.

In one of the Doris Day movies, she too was fighting a zoning battle, and the implication was, as a result, no sex: her man left her bed. Obviously, no more zoning battles for her. In the latest one, *The Thrill of It All*. Doris Day is an obstetrician's wife who gets a chance to do television commercials. She enjoys it, but her husband doesn't like it very much. He, by his great scientific ingenuity, is helping one of his patients, a poor, embittered, sophisticated career woman, to finally have a baby at the age of forty. In the end, the baby is born in a taxicab on the East River Drive, with Doris helping to deliver it and the obstetrician galloping up on a horse. Doris Day says, "Now I know what life is all about, helping you to deliver this baby." But of course, how foolish can the audience be, she can't help him deliver a baby in the operating room tomorrow, so what will she do? Aha, she'll have another baby herself, that's the answer. But the real life Doris Days can't go on having babies forever.

Recently you may have seen an advertising campaign by one of the women's service magazines. There are three obviously neurotic women. One says, "I read this wonderful poem; it was such an escape." Dreamy, neurotic escape. A second one, a very hard, bitter, career woman with a hat pulled down, says, "I read this article about India in such and such a magazine. It kept me occupied coming home on the five thirty-five." Another woman who looks as if something is wrong with her says, "I read a wonderful novel by so-and-so." Then we see the fourth one, healthy and wholesome, Mrs. Average Housewife: "I read about a new paint for the children's room. I won't use it, Jim will." The magazine only a homemaker could love. No articles about India, no poems, no great literature here, only service to home and children.

Red book magazine had a story about a woman who felt guilty because she just sat home and baked cookies and fooled around while her neighbor made petitions to improve the schools. This neighbor said, "Goodness, how are women ever going to assume their equality if you are just going to sit on your behind and make cookies?" Then a mousy little wren came to town who wouldn't even sign the petitions; she literally did nothing but bake cookies. And the guilty woman discovered that this mousy little wren, who didn't even bother to look attractive, had been a physicist. But she saw no greater thing in the world to do now than to bake cookies in her own home. This was evidently supposed to mean that it was all phony, the idea that women could make petitions and campaign for the school board or be physicists or dream of doing something else besides bake cookies in their own kitchens.

Margaret Mead, who has contributed much to our knowledge of the plasticity of the human male and female but who has also helped to create the feminine mystique, had an article in *Redbook* attacking the report of the President's Commission on the Status of Women because, she said, it assumed that political life and work would be important to women and did not emphasize enough that women must be full-time wives and mothers. This woman, who is a world-famous, far-traveled anthropologist, declares approvingly that more and more educated women are choosing to be full-time wives and mothers. Margaret Mead even asked that if women really finish the job that the President's Commission says needs to be done, "who will be there to bandage the child's knee and listen to the husband's troubles and give the human element in the world?" Somehow she never explains how the woman is going to listen to the husband's troubles during the eight hours of the day when the husband is at the office, and how she is going to bandage the child's knee when the child isn't there but is at school.

Thus the resistance to the revolution even shows up in the ranks of what I call "capital C" Career women, women who would not be caught dead themselves behind a dishpan, and who from their vantage point back from the expedition in New Guinea or behind the television microphone, say, "But what greater thing can a woman do but drudgery for those she loves, and how many really rewarding, satisfying things in the world are there to do anyway—look at taxi drivers?" Somehow this is always at Radcliffe or Harvard, where the choices open to women, or men, are far more than being taxi drivers. Or, they sneer, how many women have abilities to do anything beyond housework? Of course, these women know they have such abilities, but they are exceptional.

I don't think they are so exceptional. I think that 50 percent of the women are above average, just as 50 percent aren't. And I think that while all women have to get dressed, eat dinner, make meals and keep houses clean, these tasks can hardly use all the abilities of an above-average woman—or the whole life-span abilities of a below-average woman, either. For we are going to live, my generation, to be seventy-five, and our daughters may live to be one hundred. No matter how much they will love their children, how much they will want to be wives and mothers and truly enjoy motherhood, it will be such a small part of their lives. It would deprive them of their real choices to say that they should think of themselves only, or even primarily, in terms of their sexual difference from man (long live it) and never in terms of their unique human abilities, whatever they may be.

There is also resistance on the part of some men, but not of as many as you think. I am increasingly surprised at the numbers of men who really do have a full regard for their wives as human beings, who want them to have full lives of their own, who are weary of the burden and the guilt of having to make up to a woman for all the life she misses beyond the home, for the world she has no part in. Men are weary of coming home from that tough, complex rat race in society only to be met by a pent-up wife who feels short-changed in the narrow world of home—and finds him somehow inadequate because he can't give her all that magic fulfillment she has been told to expect from marriage. But perhaps he is not inadequate at all; perhaps she is merely asking for too much from marriage. Perhaps for a woman, as for a man, marriage and love, while two of the basic, great values of life, cannot be all of life. For it is a fact that most men do not spend most of the hours of their day, most of the years of their lives, preoccupied with love or sex, as much as those passions are overglorified in the public image today. These images are directed at women, and they are directed at women to sell them something.

Do we really have to keep on acquiescing to the sexual sell, and is it really essential to the American economy? I have a hunch that if women were released to develop their full potential, they might want things that would keep the American economy alive just as much as those eighty-eight ways to get that man or keep him, or those magical powders that will keep the skin pure white. Perhaps more of the American economy might go to research and education, perhaps there might be other changes, but I hardly think keeping the American housewife in a state of perpetual frustration and emptiness and nagging discontent is essential to the American economy.

I think there are some men who may resist this massive, delayed revolution because they have had too much smothering from mothers who need them for an identity, and thus feel insecure in their own ability to move as human beings in the world. They may think they need a woman as a doormat. They may need someone whom they can think of as inferior so that they can feel superior. But I doubt that it is really going to solve any man's problem for his wife to beat herself down, to project a phony inferiority. Isn't it pretty contemptuous of man to say that his ego is so weak that he needs her to pretend to be something that she isn't, in order to make him feel like a big boy? I happen to think men are stronger than that. It might be better for both men and women if they could accept each other for what they are. It might even free men from the binds of the masculine mystique. Someone else will have to write a book about that.

I think all of these resistances are not that great. Our own self-denigration of ourselves as women and perhaps our own fears are the main problems. For it is an unknown road we now must take, and if we move on it, we take risks. It takes courage. We face a more complex life when we begin to create this new image of woman and to put all of these pieces of ourselves together. We risk being tested, being measured. We risk exposing ourselves if we insert ourselves into the human story instead of living through our husbands and children. The longer we hide in our homes evading the challenges of the society that is moving and changing so fast outside our doors, the more we may be afraid to move, the more we may wish, insist, somehow, that we can and only need to be wives and mothers, this is all, this is the greatest thing in life. And it is indeed the bedrock of life, the beginning.

But it isn't all, it can't be all for women today. And if it has to be all for some women too old or too frightened to risk a more complex road, it is not too late for most women. Most women have more strength than they imagine. We do not know what strength we have.

I will tell you something that might make you feel good; it makes me feel good. There is a study not yet published that is being done at Washington University Medical School about the growth of the self in women, the ego, identity, whatever you want to call it. Do you know who has the most mature and the strongest self of all, the most autonomous ego? The committed woman volunteer. Her sense of identity is much stronger than that little housewife. Much stronger, interestingly enough, than the professional social worker in the same field. Why? Because she pioneered on an unknown road; because she had to structure a growth pattern for herself, not *a pattern already there and structured by society; because in many cases she innovated; and because she imposed a discipline on herself that was not imposed by the demands of the paycheck. She is living this new image of woman, she is showing the way. And so are you, whether you realize it or not.

We must all say yes to ourselves as women, and no to that outworn, obsolete image, the feminine mystique. We must stop denigrating ourselves, stop acquiescing in the remaining prejudices the mystique enshrines. We must recognize and affirm each other in the massiveness of our own numbers and our own strength and ask for all women what we all need to move freely ahead. One does not move freely and joyously ahead if one is always torn by conflicts and guilts, nor if one feels like a freak in a man's world, if one is always walking a tightrope between being a good wife and mother and fulfilling one's commitments to society—with no help from society. If we ask, I think we can get simple institutional solutions from society to these real problems. Well-run five- or eight-hour-a-day nursery schools or day-care centers are needed, and Maternity leaves that are real and not just on paper—so that the staff doesn't become mysteriously reduced when you get pregnant. Real credit needs to be given for the work you have done as volunteers. More part-time patterns are needed in all professions for mothers. Above all, women must assume real political equality and take their place as decision-makers in political life.

We must ask for these things ourselves, for no one will hand women anything, any more than society has handed Negroes anything. It was only when they said for themselves, in 1963, the young ones and the old ones, we will no longer eat, live, work, go to school, or even go to the toilet as anything less than free and full and equal human beings, that the rights they won on paper a hundred years ago began to be a reality, and our society began to take them seriously.

American women—the only majority, perhaps, that is still treated like a rather unequal minority—do not have the uncomfortable suffering of the Negro. But they will not be free and equal members of society until they take themselves seriously and finish the work of the delayed revolution. Each and every woman must in her own life stop denigrating herself and must help to win these things for other women.

I have three children. I love them. I would not have missed having them for the world. They are a great fulfillment of my life. But my children no more fulfill, no more define me as a woman; my love for and my life with my husband no more defines or fulfills me as a woman, than the work I do, the nonsexual passions, the questions and the search that made me write my book—and the wish to help write the human story that makes me urge you to affirm your own identity as full human beings and to help create this new image of women as people, both for your daughters and for our society.