

Can a Feminist Homeschool Her Child?

by Wendy McElroy

“Welcome to my home school—my private, little rebellion against the enemies of educational excellence and the forces of feminism who say a woman’s place is in the paying workplace.”

—ISABEL LYMAN

“A Mother’s Day of Home Schooling”

In a peaceful mutiny against the quality and content of government education, a growing number of parents are choosing to stay at home to teach their children one-on-one. A recent federal National Center for Education Statistics survey (Parent-NHES:1999) estimates that 850,000 children were homeschooled in 1999; this constituted 1.7 percent of all students between the ages of 5 to 17. Other studies put the figure as high as 1.5 million children. According to the Heartland Institute, for the last decade and a half, homeschooling has grown at a rate of 15 to 20 percent a year.

Women who choose not to enter the work force are in the forefront of this phenomenon. The Parent-NHES: 1999 survey provides a portrait of the “typical” homeschooling family with its stay-at-home mom, or mother-educator. It consists of a two-parent household with three or more children, in which the parents are highly educated and the father is the breadwinner.

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In short, many educated women are turning their backs on careers and returning to the traditional domestic value of putting children and family first. They are reversing the social revolution sparked by Betty Friedan’s pivotal 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which prompted women to flood out of kitchens and into schools or the workplace. Homeschooling constitutes one of the most significant trends for women and families in the last decade or so.

Yet the leading voices within feminism are either silent or ambivalent about homeschooling.

Several factors undoubtedly contribute to their muted reaction. For example, before 1999, surveys generally indicated that homeschoolers were motivated mainly by moral and religious concerns: that is, parents didn’t like the secular values being taught in public schools. These early homeschoolers tended to view feminism as a form of secular humanism, which was damaging their children. In turn, some left-statists lumped all homeschoolers together and labeled them “Christian right-wing extremists.” And that segment of the political spectrum is antagonistic to both political correctness and feminism.

But homeschooling has gone mainstream. Currently, the most common reason for schooling at home, as stated in the 1999 survey, is to provide “better education” (48.9 percent), with “religious reasons” coming second (38.4 percent). In other words, an increasing number of parents do not trust the public-school system to impart skills and knowledge to their children. A prominent homeschooling site lists “the dropping test scores” and “the loss of academic discipline (core knowledge)” as the top two reasons for homeschooling. (The presence of a politically correct agenda in the classroom was third.)¹

Their suspicions are well founded. In an article titled “More Than Half of California 9th Graders Flunk Exit Exam,” Kathleen Kennedy Manzo reported on a recent survey of 9th graders in that state. Eighty-one percent of the state’s freshmen took an exam to test state educational standards. The bar had been set purposefully low with a 60 percent score in reading and 55 percent in math constituting a “pass.” Manzo observed, “A panel of teachers, administrators, parents, and community members originally proposed a passing score of 70 percent for both English and math.” Nevertheless, even with lowered standards, fewer than 45 percent of 9th graders were able to pass.²

Given that good private schools are expensive and often have long waiting lists, many parents prefer the even more private solution of keeping children at home.

Financial Dependence

Some mother-educators call themselves “feminists,” but this seems to be uncommon. Homeschooling simply does not comfortably conform to the current gender analysis and policy recommendations. A large part of the poor fit is that mother-educators stay at home and are financially dependent on the husband’s income. But other issues arise as well.

One of the few feminist critiques of homeschooling available is titled “Is Homeschooling Sexist?” by Laurae Lyster-Mensh, a self-declared feminist. The author is clearly sym-

pathetic to the basic concept of homeschooling as demonstrated by her being a mother-educator herself. But her article revolves around what she calls “an elephant in the room”: namely, the question that constitutes its title.³

Lyster-Mensh asks other homeschooling moms what messages about gender are being sent to their children. When she assures her daughter that she can achieve anything in life, Lyster-Mensh wonders, “Am I telling her she can strive toward being a homeschooling mother? Am I telling her not to?” And what of sons? “They cannot fail to notice that the ones doing the homeschooling are the mothers. We have to ask ourselves what expectations this will leave them with for themselves and for their future spouses. In the workplace, will they be able to treat female co-workers as seriously as the men?”

Lyster-Mensh raises some valid questions about gender and homeschooling families. For example, what impact does the “man as sole breadwinner” have on the decision-making process in the family? She freely admits that such issues may not pose a problem for many homeschooling families. But she raises an intriguing possibility. She speculates that, because homeschoolers feel under attack from “liberals” and pro-public-school organizations such as the National Education Association, they tend to band together and present “a united front to the world.” Divisive issues, such as the role of women in the home and society, are not discussed as openly as they might otherwise be. Of course, it is impossible to test this theory until the political opposition to homeschooling ceases to be a threat.

One main complaint of mother-educators is that feminists (outsiders) often display a dismissive or insulting attitude toward their lifestyle. In short, feminists look down on them as less liberated than working women. They see stay-at-home moms as part of the patriarchal structure (the nuclear family with traditional values) that is the wellspring of gender oppression.

The Feminine Mystique described the suburban household with its traditional domes-

tic arrangements as a “concentration camp.” Friedan claimed decades later that the wholesale rejection of domesticity that her book inspired in young women was a misinterpretation of its meaning. Nevertheless, it was a reading that caught on: liberated women are the ones who pursue careers and who are financially independent and guided by their own needs. According to this interpretation, not all choices a woman can make are politically or culturally equal. Women who choose to become housewives, to be financially dependent on a man, and to give priority to the needs of their families are unliberated.

In her article “Motherhood Gets a Face-Lift,” the homeschooling Isabel Lyman asks herself a question that must have occurred to many mother-educators, especially those who willingly gave up careers and financial independence. She wonders whether a woman who “commits herself so wholeheartedly to her children and their education” represents a “giant step backward” for women? Or is she a pioneer who defies categorization?

In response to her question, Lyman presents the answers of some other homeschooling moms.

For example, Pam Kelly of California: She was a computer/systems analyst for 18 years before becoming a mother-educator—a job she considers her most challenging and fulfilling one. She calls herself “the epitome” of what feminists *say* they are for: a woman having and exercising choice. But when she hears the word “feminist,” Pam thinks “dictator, hostile, anti-male and anti-female.”

Cindi Grelen of Oklahoma has a teaching degree, which she uses to homeschool her two daughters. She defines “a feminist” as “an angry person who is self-absorbed and on a desperate search for peace”—the peace that she has found in the politically incorrect process of “losing herself in her children.” Nevertheless, she adds, “I miss out . . . on being recognized as someone who is contributing something worthwhile to society.”

Christine Field of Illinois was a criminal prosecutor who once considered herself to

be a “blatant feminist.” No more. Today, she is the author of a book titled *Coming Home to Raise Your Children*.

The personal stories go on and on. And common themes run through many of them: the parent-educators are intelligent, educated women; they have made a conscious and considered choice to leave the work force; and they view feminism as a rebuke.

The New Women’s Movement

Homeschooling constitutes a revolution in education. But it is also one of the most significant trends to affect women and families in decades, especially since it is led by mother-educators. Homeschooling is part of a social shift by which women are moving back toward traditional family values, not because they have to but because they want to do so.

Analysis of homeschooling has focused on the children—and properly so—but the relationship of mother-educators to feminism deserves investigation in its own right. Homeschooling is a trend that mainstream feminism is resisting because the teaching at-home mom threatens many of the values it espouses, including financial independence.

The tension between homeschooling and feminism arises not from feminism per se, but from the politically correct version that has dominated the movement for over a decade. PC feminism regards the traditional family as a training ground for patriarchy—that is, for the white male culture that oppresses women.

Fortunately, other schools of feminism view staying at home as simply one more choice that a self-respecting, intelligent woman can make or reject, depending on her goals in life. Individualist feminism is one example. For this school of feminism, freedom means having every peaceful choice possible and taking personal responsibility for all your actions. In this framework, one woman’s decision to stay at home is not politically better or worse than another woman’s choice to become a CEO. Both are personal matters. Both express the core of true feminism: *choice*.

The fact that many educated, socially concerned women are rejecting feminism because they think it is rejecting them should serve as a wake-up call for the movement. Any version of feminism that wishes to survive in the 21st century had better embrace

the hardworking mother-educator and respectfully acknowledge her choice. Feminists had better do it fast. □

1. www.icehouse.net/lmstuter/hs.htm.
2. *Education Week*, June 20, 2001; www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=41calif.h20&keywords=California.
3. www.home-ed-magazine.com/HEM/176/ndsexist.html.

How Fare the Girls in School?

Political correctness in schools has been a matter of controversy lately, especially whether girls are favored or handicapped by the system.

In the early 1990s the prestigious American Association of University Women (AAUW)—whose motto is “promoting education and equity for all girls”—published two influential reports on public schools: “Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America” (1991) and “How Schools Shortchange Girls” (1992). On its Web site, AAUW describes the latter as “a startling examination of how girls in grades K–12 receive an inferior education to boys in America’s schools” (www.aauw.org/2000/hssg.html).

The reports gave rise to policy reforms that nurtured and encouraged female students. Critics of the studies would rephrase the preceding statement to read: “the reports encouraged policy reforms that discriminated against male students.”

The question of whether the public schools educationally prefer girls or boys has been a matter of hot debate. Test scores suggest that girls are currently favored. In an article titled “Where the Boys Are: Is America Shortchanging Male Children?” feminist critic Cathy Young wrote, “In 1998, 48 percent of girls but only 40 percent of boys graduating from high school had completed the courses in English, social studies, science, math, and foreign languages recommended as a minimum by the National Commission on Excellence in Education.” In 1987, however, no gender gap existed. (See *Reason* magazine, February 2001.)

In recent years, researchers have begun to reverse the perception that female students are harmed and to argue, instead, that male students are being slighted. In her study “The Myth that Schools Shortchange Girls: Social Science in the Service of Deception (1998),” psychologist Judith Kleinfeld of the University of Alaska debunked the claim that girls are educationally disadvantaged. Specifically, she dissected the AAUW report reflected in her title. Kleinfeld’s study opens, “Women’s advocacy groups have waged an intense media campaign to promote the idea that the ‘schools shortchange girls.’ Their goal is to intensify the image of women as ‘victims’ deserving special treatment and policy attention. . . . But the idea that the ‘schools shortchange girls’ is wrong and dangerously wrong” (www.uaf.edu/northern/schools/myth.html).

The study went on to explain that girls get higher grades and do better on standardized tests of reading and writing. Moreover, they receive more schooling; a greater number of females than males both enter and graduate from higher education.

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The final paragraph of the study concluded, in part, "In the hectic, crowded world of the classroom, teachers have limited time, attention and energy. Teachers are concentrating on the problems of girls, but they are dismissing the problems of boys and neglecting the problem of how to educate the most gifted students."

Incredible Shrinking Girl?

Kleinfeld drew on the more popular and political work of Christina Hoff Sommers, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, who was the first to draw national attention to the problem of shortchanged boys. In June 1996 Sommers published a warning call in *Education Week* that challenged what she called "the myth of the incredible shrinking girl." (See "Where the Boys Are," www.edweek.org/ew/1996/38sommer.h15.)

Sommers's latest book, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men* (2000) continues the theme of her earlier work, *Who Stole Feminism?* (1994) in that both expose common feminist distortions. *Who Stole Feminism?* is a broad survey of myths surrounding issues from anorexia to domestic violence. *The War Against Boys*, Sommers explained, "tells the story of how it has become fashionable to attribute pathology to millions of healthy male children . . . of how we are turning against boys and forgetting a simple truth: that the energy, competitiveness, and corporal daring of normal, decent males is responsible for much of what is right in the world."

Sommers argues that feminists have institutionalized their views within the educational system and indoctrinated children. She points an accusing finger not only at politically correct feminism in general but also at specific organizations such as the Ms. Foundation.

This accusation is becoming widespread. The novelist and feminist icon Doris Lessing recently used the Edinburgh Books Festival as a podium from which to decry the diminishment of boys, particularly within the education system. Lessing declared, "I was in a class of nine- and 10-year-olds, girls and boys, and this young woman was telling these kids that the reason for wars was the innately violent nature of men. You could see the little girls, fat with complacency and conceit while the little boys sat there crumpled, apologizing for their existence."

Debating whether Lessing's portrayal is accurate misses the point. Many people perceive it to be true. Parents who believe that schools promote feminist values are more likely to protect their sons from a discriminatory system by removing them from the system. They are likely to protect their daughters from political correctness by removing them as well.

—WENDY McELROY