

A Feminist Critique on Neoliberalism

Freedom beyond choice

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Philosophy and Feminist Theory

For awhile now, mainstream feminism has focused on individual choice as the keystone of women's freedom. This, strongly influenced by neoliberalism, emphasizes the power of individual agency to overcome obstacles. Betty Friedan, a prominent second-wave feminist, captured this in her 1963 book, "The Feminine Mystique", arguing that women needed the "freedom to choose" fulfilling careers beyond the confines of the domestic sphere. (Friedan, B. (2010). *The Feminine Mystique*. Penguin Classics)

However, in my humble opinion, this narrow viewed understanding of freedom fails to acknowledge the paramount impact of systemic inequalities on women's choices. I would instead argue for a broader definition of feminist freedom that would also encompass dismantling the very structures that limit women's options.

The question isn't whether women are free to choose, but how free this choice can truly be in a world filled with inequalities.

Neoliberalism's Flawed Promise

Neoliberalism promotes a future of freedom built on individual choice in a free market. Women, according to this view, are empowered by their ability to choose their careers, partners, lifestyles, etc. This resonates with many feminist ideals, specifically the rejection of the traditional constraints placed on women. However, as perfect as it may seem, neoliberalism ignores the reality of society's fundamental social and economic inequalities. 2021 report by the National

Women's Law Center found that women in the United States still only earn 82 cents for every dollar earned by men, a persistent pay gap that limits their economic independence. Poverty, sexism, and racism create a hierarchy where real choices are not equally available.

Consider a young woman from a low income, single parent household for example. According to a 2023 study by the Center for American Progress, only 36% of children from low income households can expect to reach the top income quantile by adulthood compared to 71% from high income households. Choosing a fulfilling career path becomes much harder for this young woman compared to someone from a wealthy family with access to top universities, internships, professional networks, etc.

Similarly, a woman facing workplace discrimination might not feel truly free to advance her career, even if she possesses the necessary skills and qualifications

The market at the end of the day is fickle, prone to herd mentality and unconscious bias. A woman, however qualified, might find her path blocked by a glass ceiling, reinforced by outdated stereotypes. This, is not freedom but just a cruel rigged game.

Individual choices can have unforeseen ripple effects. A woman denied access to quality education due to economic hardship might end up in a low-paying job, impacting not just her choices but also the life of her potential children as well.

Freedom Requires More than just Options

Feminist freedom requires much more than just the "freedom to" choose. It needs the "freedom from" systemic oppression that restrict actual choice. This includes (but is not limited to) :

Economic Justice: A living wage, affordable childcare, and accessible quality education are the minimum for allowing women to even have the option to pursue their desired careers and life goals. Without these, the "freedom to choose" a well-paying career becomes an empty promise for most women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or single mothers living pay check to pay check, struggling to make ends meet.

Equality in the Workplace : Policies that address workplace discrimination, harassment, and the gender pay gap are absolutely necessary and vital for creating a level playing field. Someone shouldn't be penalized in the workplace simply because of their gender. Importantly, this also includes destroying the

unconscious biases in hiring. This altogether would promote equal pay for equal work and foster an environment where women can feel safe to report harassment or discrimination.

- **Reproductive Rights:** Bodily autonomy and access to legal and safe abortion are fundamental to women's freedom and their ability to actively determine their own life paths. And I'm not alone in this, according to a 2022 Pew Research Center poll, 60% of Americans believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Without control over their reproductive rights, their freedom, a supposedly fundamental right, remains conditional. The ability to choose motherhood on their own terms is a keystone of a woman's right to create her own course in life.

Building a More Equitable Society

By dismantling these barriers, we could create a society where choices are not predetermined by an individual's social circumstances. Imagine a world where a young woman, from any background can pursue her dreams, not held back by economic hardship, or workplace discrimination.

Feminist freedom only thrives when women have not just the theoretical "right on paper" to choose, but also the resources and opportunities to make meaningful choices for their lives. However, this requires a shift from the rugged individualistic focus of neoliberalism towards more collective action and social change.

Feminist movements must work along with social justice movements in order to dismantle these inequalities and build a society where all individuals, regardless of gender, race, or class, have the genuine power to choose their own path.

In Conclusion

Viewing freedom beyond choice would allow us to move beyond the focus on individual empowerment. Feminist freedom flourishes when we work together to dismantle systemic inequalities and build a society where every woman, regardless of their background, has the space and support to actively shape her life to the life she desires. This is far deeper than just individual agency; it's about creating a world where all women are genuinely free.

We can't be fooled by the illusion of progress. The fight for genuine freedom is a constant struggle, a battle against a complex system that thrives on perpetuating the status quo.