



The Network Newsletter

A Joint Project of Cornell University ILR and The National Conference for Community and Justice

A Conversation with Betty Friedan The 1999 Fall Forum of The Workplace Diversity Network

On November 18, 1999, several participants of The Workplace Diversity Network gathered at the Carnegie Endowment Center for International Peace in Washington, DC to join Betty Friedan in a conversation on gender. Her most recent book, *BEYOND GENDER: THE NEW POLITICS OF WORK AND FAMILY*, encourages us to move beyond the traditional male-female framework and recognize that current institutional structures for the workplace and family life no longer match our reality. She challenges us to “think blue sky,” to create a new vision for the future where success is defined in terms of total quality of life, equality and justice. “It’s no longer a question of women versus men,” Friedan said. “For women as well as men, there is now a need to redefine the bottom line of corporate and individual success in terms of overriding human values.” The forum was co-sponsored with the Institute for Women and Work at Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

Betty Friedan has been named Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Institute for Women and Work. She co-directs, with Francine Moccio, the Institute’s Director, The New Paradigm Project, a four-year project supported by a \$1 million grant from the Ford Foundation. The New Paradigm Project is designed to help create new public policy and workplace initiatives by bringing together leaders from business, labor, the women’s movement and academia to address the need for a new paradigm of political philosophy and social action. The goal of this social dialogue is to shift conventional thinking beyond gender politics to address today’s work restructuring and its impact on relations between the sexes, the labor market and public policy. What follows are selected excerpts from our conversation.

BEYOND GENDER: IS THERE ANY CHANGE?

Betty Friedan In the US, women are now getting the same number of professional degrees as men. I thought, well, if we also had some figures showing that men were taking equal responsibility for childrearing, then we could pull up our skirts, declare victory and move on. But that’s no where near happening. Probably there is a move, a kind of consciousness move, in that direction. I don’t think it’s fashionable anymore, for the man just to help. At least with the younger people, it’s probably more of a sharing. Now you tell me, what has been your experience? Is there any change in the role of men?

Briana B. When I was one, my father asked to take paternity leave. His company had just changed the language from maternity leave to parental leave, but they didn’t think anyone would actually ask to use it. They had just changed the language. They were shocked.

Donna B. I think there’s no doubt that women are the primary care givers, especially when it comes to children, however, I do see a shift in our organization. I think men are becoming more interested and want more involvement, especially in paternity issues, when there is a child being born, and are willing to buy into the FMLA. I see a shift.

Patricia R. At my organization, we’re about 75% male populated. Since we started our work-life program, I’ve seen a lot of change take place. I think it’s slowly evolving. I know when we merged three years ago, three of my friends, whose husbands were pretty high up on the ladder, chose to stay home. I’ve also been in many meetings of late, where men with small children will say excuse

me, it's my turn to pick up the children. We have a CEO who's very supportive of work-life. I see it changing, but I think it's necessary to have that OK from the top management.

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- Evelyn M. My mother and father had eight children. I'm the youngest. When my father became ill, my mother went to work and my father raised me. He made dresses; he could do everything except my hair. He would take me to school. It bothered him that he was ill and couldn't work, but I think he was comfortable in dealing with the children. When I got older, my expectation in terms of a male partner was to share responsibilities. I've been very lucky, because that has happened with my husband. When our child was ill, there was no doubt we would rotate who was going to go to work and who was going to stay and watch him.
- Rochelle L. My husband's from the Middle East, from Iran. There are a lot of false stereotypes about men from Iran. In fact, from a cultural standpoint, men are very much involved in the care of children, a very close relationship. I see that with my own family. He is not a helper. He is a partner in the childcare experience. He's changed probably more diapers than I have. We share responsibilities, especially now that I work a lot of long hours. It's different.
- Betty Friedan Sweden has always been way ahead of us. They've had parental leave for both fathers and mothers long before we did. Their policies were much better than ours. But until recently, women took it; very few men. Listening to the Swedish labor attaché, there is now beginning to be an increase in men taking this leave. I asked how they brought it about. They've been using posters to address a consciousness raising, culture changing message about the role of men. As a group, they've actually had to do a consciousness raising, culture changing thing about the role of men.
- I come back to the fact that women are now getting the same number of professional degrees as men. And women are making 74 cents on the dollar to what men make. The difference all starts at the childrearing years. If men were considered equally responsible for childrearing, then we could really say we declare victory and we won. It seems to me that's the next step.
- Daniel G. Wasn't the step before that the leveling out the wage gap? I think the inequality is more in terms of the financial means versus . . .
- Betty Friedan It's 74 cents on the dollar. If you analyze it, the discrepancy starts with the childrearing years and never catches up. So it's not just discrimination against women as such; it's the fact that the structures of career attendance, of job attendance, are all based on the lives of women in the past, where wives took care of the details of life. Now men today don't have those wives. Obviously the women don't. The structures have not caught up.
- Scott M. Doesn't it begin with the actual hiring level -- that women are hired in at a lower level? The premise I'm getting at, and something I've noticed anecdotally, is that a man, in the very beginning, will be hired at the higher end of the salary scale; women, at the lower end. That gap was then widened as salary increases came along. All right, true confession time. When I was working in a hospital, a female dominated environment, the HR policy was to hire employees in at the starting salary. But there was this informal fudge room. My point is that women invariably never challenged the initial salary when I explained it was hospital policy. I must have hired 30 women. Men almost always would say: Wait a minute. Can't you do something more for me? This was ten, twelve years ago.
- Betty Friedan Do you think that women today would be more likely to challenge it? -- They'd better!

Daniel G. I think of my step-mother-in-law. She is very, very successful. She's vice president of a major network news department. I believe the only reason she got to be where she is today is because she didn't have a child of her own and was able to dedicate all this time to her job. I'm not sure she would have been able to make it that far if she had a child.

Betty Friedan That scenario, the either-or, is a formula. It just makes my blood boil. Men are never asked to make that choice.

Rochelle L. I'm a second generation at my company. Both of my parents worked there. When I hired in 17 years ago, the words of wisdom from my mother were: If you have to take time off for your children being sick, don't ever admit that you're taking time off because of your children. Save up vacation. Use vacation and don't tell them why you're taking time off. For some reason, during her time that was frowned upon. Now I have seen some changes, I have. The reality is we're going to have sick children.

Betty Friedan The few women who did have kids and who did get into the corporate world, they sometimes concealed their pregnancies as long as possible. They'd lean over backwards not to ask for childcare. They didn't want the boss to notice that they had children. A lot of those early women had been virtually the only women in their own occupation. They were really conservative because their whole culture had been: Well, don't let them notice I'm a woman. The few women who made it in the years before the women's movement were not like other women. They were the exception to the rule.

When we organized the women's movement, for the first time we had women identify with other women in the workplace. Even in the early days of the women's movement, we had some women who were among the few with good jobs. It was noteworthy that these women would identify with other women because that was not the rule. I remember when I interviewed women who had gotten somewhere, they would assume protective covers. Either they would dress like the men and talk like the men or they would hide under the lace collar. I don't know if any of you are old enough to remember the "dress for success" -- the exaggerated pin stripe or the gray flannel.

I remember I spent some time at West Point. I actually was brought in as a consultant by a very enlightened, Vietnam-decorated commander, who wanted it to work with the women. When women were admitted in the military academy, they were issued military dress and everyday uniforms, pants and shirts as well. But everybody wore pants. I remember one story. On Friday, there was a parade. They all dressed in the dress uniform. These women organized themselves to all wear their skirts. I was so moved by that. Yes, we have a right to be here and we don't have to be like men. I thought that was a real breakthrough. And I still look for that kind of thing and I still think that we're not there yet. Still everything is measured in terms of male values, male priorities.

GENERATIONAL PROGRESS: EXPECTATIONS, AWARENESS, CONSCIOUSNESS

Susan W. I was working with a union-management group from a chemical plant. It was an older plant, dirty work, traditional labor relations. The workforce was overwhelmingly male. When asked what could be accomplished to improve the work environment, one younger worker said he wanted childcare. He worked one shift and his wife worked another. If he had to work overtime when she was supposed to go to work, there would be no one to be with the child. So

childcare was a big concern. The older, more senior workers looked at him as if he was from a different planet.

Pat G. I was at a conference for Kentucky law enforcement and I happened to be seated at a table with students from a master's level criminal justice program. They were complaining that they were being recruited by the FBI and other federal law enforcement agencies because they were women. The recruiters would literally say to them: This is the best time to get into law enforcement or non-traditional occupations.

Betty Friedan Well, what's wrong with that?

Pat G. That was my question. We're talking a different generation here. They were offended because they felt they were being recruited because they were women, not because of their qualifications. To them the recruiters were saying: I don't care about your qualifications, of course you're not qualified, you're a woman. The underlying message was that they had a quota to fill and you're female. One woman was African-American; she felt they wanted her twice. It discouraged me that these women who were in their 20's were not aware of the history of the women's movement. They didn't know what battles had been fought.

Betty Friedan The very fact is that they were being recruited because of those battles!

Daniel G. As a member of the younger generation, I don't feel as if I fully appreciate what went before me, the struggles you went through, what you and other women before you, including my own mother, have done for our country. If you don't experience it, it doesn't seem real. I can only watch it on TV or research it. That's one of my questions. How do you perceive the younger women in our country now? There's kind of a backlash by women about the women's movement.

Betty Friedan Do you really think so?

Daniel G. For some, not all.

Andrea S. [As another member of the younger generation,] I believe the women's movement has gotten me to the point where I don't question whether I'm going to be better than a man. I question whether I'm gonna be better than I think I can be. I'm extremely appreciative of that. When I go into an interview, I expect it to be based on what I've done and accomplished, not the fact that I'm a woman. I think that's what the women's movement has given me, that for my generation. It's about being the best that you can be.

Pat G. It's not about potential. It's about perception and how perceptions are based.

Betty Friedan Do you think your generation does not actually experience discrimination? Do you or don't you? If so, how?

Elizabeth L. I think I've grown up with the assumption that I would be judged not as a woman instead of a male, but as a person. I think in general, our generation walks into a situation not expecting to be discriminated against. It'd be shocking.

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- Daniel G. I still feel a victim of my [female] gender when it comes to certain issues, maybe not work. I go to the gym at 6:30 every morning. When I leave my house, my antenna's up. I run to my car. My key is ready. I don't know if men do that. It's not necessarily related to work, but to me, that's being discriminated against in a way because I have to behave differently.
- Betty Friedan Well that's a very different example. I think that in a general sense, there probably still is a sense of male entitlement that goes along with the muscles and you know what. And women don't have that. Then the question to me is: Is that counterbalanced by the events of the last couple generations of women, by the push of the women's movement that certainly did affect the airwaves of consciousness, right? What generational changes would there have been in entitlement and empowerment without it? We had to fight for it. We got it. It happened so fast and so broadly that the next generation, or at least the next second generation, when they became conscious, they were entitled.
- Tammy B. I want to acknowledge that point. I'm in a slightly different generation -- cruising headlong into forty -- the voice of the middle sector. When I came out of graduate school with a very strong, empowering degree, I spent a year being abused, verbally, psychologically abused by the male for whom I was working. Because I came out as the beneficiary of what you, Betty, and your colleagues did a generation before, I didn't get it. All I know is that every night, I was throwing up. And every time I would hear the man come down the hall, I was like a trained rat; I would get sick, literally a physiological response. A year of that. I never said I was being sexually harassed in my own workplace. I didn't get it until he sat down across from me and said: I'm so sorry. I've been treating you so badly in this last year and you know why? I'm totally threatened by you because when I was away, you ran the office and you're thirty years younger than I am. He finally came out and said it. It was like: Ahah!
- I came in with the assumption of fairness and equity and that, of course I'm going to be treated well. And it took my abuser to finally say: Man, have I been abusing you. And the only response I had was: You know, I get it now and you will never do it again. In fact, no man will ever do it again. But I went through that year thinking: It must be me. This isn't about lack of fairness in the workplace, couldn't possibly be. It's all supposed to be fair now. They all did the hard work already. So I think that because we go in with the assumption of equity, sometimes we don't see it when it happens until it splits us in two.
- Daniel G. What I hear you saying is different. The question right now is: Do I feel I'm being discriminated against on an everyday basis? I don't know. I know last week I tried to get a cab in NYC and a lot of cabs went by. I don't know.
- Betty Friedan I think that's true.
- Evelyn M. Sometimes you don't recognize it, not until the person actually says to you that this is the thing. Then you take the blinders off, when you're forced to take the blinders off. I look at young people of color who seem removed from the past. It does damage to progress. You have to continually know where you've come from, the seat of the person who sat there before you, to see how much blood is on the back of the chair. That's something you must keep remembering.
- Betty Friedan I still have a question, and I don't know the answer. It all happened very fast, so there are young women your age who really never experienced the put down the way women always

used to experience it. Do you think that the younger generation today have a consciousness that says I'm OK. I'm up to anything. I can do anything and not have to tiptoe, detour, apologize? Do you think young women today, generally, have a consciousness that comes from the movement for equality, even if they are not conscious of that history?

- Susan W. What I hear coming from the younger women's voices here today is the expectation of competency. We're competent and we should be treated fairly. This is probably one of the most successful outcomes of the work that you, Betty, started and those of us who are well over the forty-year mark, have accomplished, the expectation of competency. It's a powerful force. Thirty years ago, women were beginning statements with phrases like: Well, maybe I'm off base with this, but. . . We were still venturing. We didn't have that confidence in our own abilities. I hear these younger women expressing a different expectation.
- Scott M. Some of this has been very interesting in terms of the next generation of women, particularly in terms of whether or not women are carrying forward past vestiges of internalized oppression. What's not been talked about generationally is whether sexism still exists and how it exists. My experience working with high school age boys is that they aren't as evolved as I hear this conversation talking about. They're still objectifying women. There's still a real notion about superiority, inferiority, about tolerating women. Even though women may be looked at as being able to be productive in the workplace, that they could do a job as well or better than a man, I wonder how that plays out around male sexism, which I don't see dissipating to a tremendous degree generationally.
- Betty Friedan You don't think so?
- Scott M. The proof in the pudding to me is when I'm in a room that's male only, the doors are closed, and I'm having a conversation with high school aged young men. What does it mean to you to be a man? What did you learn about being a man? What did you learn about how women are to behave, how men are to behave? I don't hear that conversation as much different than what it would have been when I was in high school. Men are to be strong. Men are to be breadwinners. They are to be heads of households. They are to make the decisions. Now there are always outliers, but I find a locker room mentality still takes over when it's just a men's only conversation.
- Elizabeth L. I don't necessarily feel that a lot of young women have the consciousness that discrimination might be happening. For example, younger women I know from undergraduate college, through law school, fully have the expectation of finding work with a good law firm and being on a partner track. They don't feel that they would be discriminated against as a woman. Yet I hear these young women saying: But I'm not going to do it because if I want to have a family, I couldn't do it. So I'm not. These young women have the expectation. They have the wherewithal that they can do it. But they don't have the consciousness to say: Hey, wait a minute. What's going on that says I can't?
- Betty Friedan What you're saying is that this generation is aware of the opportunities that are open to them, but still have traditional ambitions to marry and have kids. And they don't see that it fits together?
- Elizabeth L. Yes.

Betty Friedan There's a reality perception here. There are several explanations. One is, of course, that you can always bash the media. Feminism is anti-family. That was not the reality at all, certainly not of mainstream feminism. But then there's also something else. When the women's movement got started, and I was there, it was at the end of the period after World War II. Women were supposed to go back home, and several generations of women who didn't have kids during the Depression and the war were having babies like mad. The feminine mystique arose in all its traditional terms. Career, in addition to family, for a while, became a dirty word. Then we had the women's movement. I wrote my book, *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*. Now your generation is coming along and women are geared to ambition again.

There was the perfect headline in the New York Times a few years ago: American Men Not Doing Fifty Percent of the Housework. I loved that because the assumption that American men should be doing fifty percent of the housework on the cover of the New York Times was pretty good, pretty good. It turned out that the men were doing thirty-something percent. When we looked at studies, what emerges as a fact is that less housework is being done.

Does the younger generation have a concept that they can and should get the training that they are capable of and aspire as high as they want to go in their field or profession, and also have the choices they might want to make about marriage and children? Do they have that kind of confidence in that the way men do?

As long as women are told they have to make a choice between family and bla bla bla, and love and nurturing and ambition to get ahead, we are not there. Furthermore, sooner or later, your generation, the younger generation, has got to start conceptualizing a view of success that takes into account not only career, but quality of life and that departs from the male model. Because everything that we now think about success and career and how it's measured, is based on the experience of the men of the past, whose wives took care of domestic life. It's all been based on that. And we do not have yet a conceptualized set of measures, of values, of whatever.

Daniel G. When are you gonna write that book?

Betty Friedan Well, you guys are going to write that book!

NEW VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Pat G. Betty, when you said that our expectations are predicated on the male model and we haven't really changed that, it made me wonder if what we look at as progress is really just role reversal. If the woman is doing well in her career and has Mr. Mom at home, it's still the same model.

Susan W. On that note, here's something that I've felt for the past five years or so. I'm 51. I work at least 50 hours a week. I'm tired and I don't know how to get out of it. What on earth made me think that I wanted to be in that male model? Did you do this to me?

Betty Friedan Well, in recent years, I think feminists have been questioning the male model and a model of success that doesn't take in liveliness. We need a new campaign: Get a Life!

It has been over 60 years since there has been a movement in the United States for a shorter workweek. If anything, people now are working more hours because they are doing more overtime, two jobs.

Here we are on the verge of the millennium and we should be thinking into the future. As I said, now women are getting equal numbers of professional degrees as men. The next generation could consider the playing field leveled if parenting were considered equally the responsibility of men. So that's obviously one thing that has to happen.

The other thing, and I can only say that I think something like this has to happen without knowing what the outline would be, is to get a scale, a measurement of values, that measure success, effectiveness of a program, of a policy, of a person's individual career life in a way that gets beyond a strict dollars and cents bottom line. I've shorthanded this by saying QOL - quality of life - factored into GDP. How are we going to get that? Are we going to get that? Is there a movement to that end?

Tammy B.

It also strikes me, when we talk about the next millennium, that one of our biggest challenges, and it's probably going to be women who lead it, is to redefine what all is, what success is. I hear us still using this individualistic what I want, what I need, what I'm going to get for me and mine. There is no community in it. I think it's gotten worse in this country, not better - a thousand points of light be damned. We haven't changed our dynamic. It takes a village, for whatever that was worth. Nice African philosophy but it's not real.

When I think about success, what's wrong about being in a role and being in a job, maybe you don't move for twenty years but you're giving and creating and learning and contributing. Who cares what the title is. I think that's the struggle and I think women are going to have to lead it - a coalition of white women and women of color and poor women and rich women saying: No, let's redefine success because it's not working this way. I would suggest that in the macro culture of this country success is about making a lot of money and having a big title, which is why the housewife looks like a very dreary job.

Betty Friedan

You could have a campaign called "General Life for Men and Women." But it would be an absolute injustice, if you are in anyway responsible for the education of the next generation, to bring up girls who are just housewives. It's irresponsible and dangerous not to teach a woman to make her way in society. Women today are not going to have ten children. The years they're going to stay home with the children are relatively few.

Susan W.

Betty, thank you so much for joining us. One message I'm taking from this conversation is that we need to learn how to think a different way, to break out of the boxes of our past experience. We learn new ways to explore these issues when we move beyond the old gender war concept and are able to identify new allies, when we get "Beyond Gender." Now, there are some very interesting things going on that cross gender lines. We need to pay attention to that information. The new data is showing that more men want to have a shared role in their children's lives. There is one study that shows that women and men alike want 11 hours more a week of their own time to deal with their homes, to deal with their families, to deal with themselves. It's a general response. We have to look for beyond gender definitions of success, get out of our old boxes, look for allies and use new ideas to build a better future.

Betty Friedan

Well I think we should look blue sky, have the blue sky discussion as we approach the new millennium. Let's think blue sky, not just role reversal. The average life expectancy of American women today is 80, average life expectancy. For men it's 72, it should be higher for men. Maybe when we reduce the macho expectation, it will get higher I hope. What do we want to do with that?