

## ABSTRACT

### The Myth of Work/Life Balance

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The feminist movement over the last few centuries has been essential in acknowledging the historical subjugation of women and remedying it through significant legal and cultural changes. However, we have reached a point where it is expected that all women should have a successful career, marriage, and mothering experience, and all alone by themselves, eventually attaining the status of perfection. In this thesis, I am arguing that work/life balance for women is a myth, because of the modern unsustainable culture surrounding human limitations in the personal and professional sphere. It starts with a historical overview of the feminist movement, including the biographical accounts of key figures and their contributions. The next chapter then moves into a philosophical overview of feminist ideas, and then explores the question of "how did we get here?" in the modern era of "girlboss." The final chapter serves as an argument against work/life balance using sociological data, and then argues for women of the new working generation to utilize their community and personal empathy to embrace the finiteness of all humans and find comfort in that kind of human flourishing.

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THE MYTH OF WORK/LIFE BALANCE

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## CHAPTER ONE

### A Historical View of the Feminist Movement

#### *Introduction*

Modern women are faced with a question every day: how can we balance work, life, and family? I was first asked this question as a child, when I thought about what I wanted to be when I grew up— eventually settling on “attorney”— and people would push back, asking me about my future children and their wellbeing. But considering this question has led me to ask another one: how did we get to a place where women are expected to do and be successful in *everything*? Mothering, cooking, cleaning, and excelling at one’s job seem to be the bare minimum to not be a traitor to the female sex. As a Christian, family and vocation more are everything, but where does profession come into play? Human beings are finite by definition, and life satisfaction for the modern woman is pressured to be through her career. It seems as though the progress in the women’s movement has been skewed. With these questions in mind, this thesis is an exploration of the burden on women to balance childbearing and professional work. First, it is a history of the women’s movement with distinct descriptions of the key players of feminism. Second, I will explore the philosophical ideas underlying the feminist movement, working through the waves one by one and analyzing the ideas that got us here today. Third, I will present my argument that work/life balance is a myth— rather, it is about finding a well-rounded set of values that will lead to intrinsic satisfaction, all the while fighting the structural barriers that face the modern working mother. The third

chapter is also where I will offer my own personal perspective, creating a framework that could work as an alternative to “work/life balance” for my own generation.

### *Feminism*

When exploring the women’s rights movement, we need to understand what it means when the word “feminism” will inevitably be used in this thesis. What is feminism? For many people, the definition of the word has changed over the years. If you asked someone fifty years ago what it means to be a feminist, the answer would likely be different from the one given by a young woman in her twenties in 2023. This word can reach and affect gender, body and bodily autonomy. It impinges on the issue of abortion, and, in the case of this thesis, professional occupation.<sup>1</sup> I understand feminism as the acknowledgement of the history of oppression of women, and the feminist movement is the organized struggle and fight against the oppression.<sup>2</sup> With that in mind, the women’s movement has indeed changed its focus over time. Beginning with the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft, equality in education led to the fight for the vote in the women’s suffrage movement, and then to equality in profession.<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, this fight turned into the fight for bodily autonomy and the establishment of “the right to choose” within the scope of *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>4</sup> Currently, the women’s movement finds itself in the Post-*Roe*, post #MeToo era,<sup>5</sup> in a time where women have much more equality in profession

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<sup>1</sup> IWDA, “What Is Feminism?”

<sup>2</sup> IWDA.

<sup>3</sup> Riegel, *American Feminists*.

<sup>4</sup> MacLean, *The American Women’s Movement, 1945-2000*.

<sup>5</sup> “The Shifting State of Feminism in America - The New York Times.”

and education.<sup>6</sup> In fact, women now outnumber men in many American universities, though many still feel as though the collective fight is just beginning.

However, despite the success of the movement, a certain weariness has seemed to befall female professionals, and I believe it is a symptom of the “women can do it all” era. With the rise of movements focusing on mental health, as well as a recovery from isolation from the pandemic, more and more women are recognizing the toxic positivity that comes with ignoring their own physical limits in the name of feminism. They are expected to balance childbearing, a successful profession, a well-kept home, and their own personal development and health.<sup>7</sup> After the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of women left the workforce,<sup>8</sup> returning to the home after either being forced to because of a lack of childcare, because they saw the damage of past careers with overbearing workloads that forced both mothers and fathers to be away from home.<sup>9</sup> The labor shortage since then has highlighted this issue, as more and more companies and organizations are switching their benefits in order to be more family-friendly, since people have less patience for a lack of maternal leave, or less-than-flexible work hours. In short, the culture is shifting, but it shows there is more work to be done in terms of women and the general attitude about women and their work. It begs the question: how did we get here?

The answer to this question goes back to the beginning of philosophy, in the days of Aristotle and Descartes, where people were beginning to understand and ask what it

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<sup>6</sup> Parker, “What’s behind the Growing Gap between Men and Women in College Completion?”

<sup>7</sup> Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All.”

<sup>8</sup> Gonzalez, “Nearly 2 Million Fewer Women in Labor Force.”

<sup>9</sup> Gonzalez.



means to be human.<sup>10</sup> This is typically where people find the origin of systemic beliefs against women, seeing them as “lesser than.” Early philosophers focused on the mind over the body, describing what exactly separates man from beast. In doing so there was an added emphasis of importance on the roles and professions that required the use of mind over body. Since women were commonly associated with their purposes being in their body in the form of childbearing and childbirth, women were thought of as primarily “bodily,” leading to the original subjugation.<sup>11</sup> Religious and biblical ideas also developed during this time that are still used today. In certain religious settings complementarianism is the norm based on the biblical idea of women serving different purposes that prevent them from leading both in the home and workplace.

For this thesis, and for the history of the burden placed upon women, I find it appropriate to study the women's movement in the United States, as it represents the want for women to be involved in society as individuals and not as property— for the recognition of their own mind over body.<sup>12</sup> For much of society during the late 19th and early 20th century, women relied on men and their marriage prospects not necessarily for love, but for financial survival.<sup>13</sup> The industrial revolution as well as the first World War marked the period in which women and children started working in factories in order to be able to sustain themselves and their families, but it was not out of a desire for achievement and autonomy, but rather to sustain a certain quality of life and, in some cases, simply to put food on the table. Moral panics at the cusp of the industrial

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, “Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women.”

<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir, Capisto-Borde, and Malovany-Chevallier, *The Second Sex*.

<sup>12</sup> Spelman, “Woman as Body.”

<sup>13</sup> Ruggles, “Patriarchy, Power, and Pay.”

revolution found women— both married and not— fighting for the vote to support moral policies such as Prohibition. <sup>14</sup>

The year 1848 marked the first official event of the women’s rights movement in the US, when a group of abolitionists gathered to discuss the role of women. This was the Seneca Falls Convention, and it created a public attitude and statement that had otherwise been pushed underground: women deserved their own political identities.<sup>15</sup> The Seneca Falls Convention was led in part by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. For the rest of this section, I want to provide biographical accounts of some of the key players in the feminist movement, starting with Mary Wollstonecraft. I will describe their roles and contributions in the development of ideas considering women and profession, in order to provide a holistic trajectory of these women’s lives and their own work.

### *Mary Wollstonecraft*

Born in 1759 in London, England, Mary Wollstonecraft is widely considered to be one of the first Western women’s rights activists, focusing her work on access to education and the double standard of men’s accounts of women. Well-known for her tragic circumstances, famous family, and unstable relationships, Wollstonecraft’s famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* served as a catalyst for approaching issues surrounding women differently, namely the equality of mental capability and reason between both sexes. Wollstonecraft herself started out as a teacher after leaving her family farm, where she developed her beliefs that informed her passion for equality and education. This led to her eventual move to France, a place she felt would be more

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<sup>14</sup> “The Surprisingly Complex Link Between Prohibition and Women’s Rights.”

<sup>15</sup> Riegel, *American Feminists*.

accepting of her beliefs, and a place of comparably revolutionary ideas.<sup>16</sup> France was also where her first known partner, Gilbert Imlay, was, and with whom she lived and eventually shared a child. However, after a mental breakdown she went back to London to join a political advocacy group who developed and wrote down “radical” ideas. Members of this group included Thomas Paine and William Godwin, a man who she later married and who fathered her child, the writer Mary Shelley. Unfortunately, shortly after the birth of Mary, Wollstonecraft died, with several of her works already published.<sup>17</sup>

Influenced by the Enlightenment as well as industrialization in the 18th century, Wollstonecraft created *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. This work argued against her current educational system, one that was gendered but that “deliberately trained women to be frivolous and incapable.”<sup>18</sup> Instead, she fought for a system that understood that women had the same professional potential as men, and could therefore produce women who could not only work in the home, but also live a life outside the home. Her idea of freedom was to have the same rights as man, which was a nuanced concept at the time. Many did not believe that women were unequal, but simply led different lives with other freedoms. However, “Mary Wollstonecraft crafted what we now recognise as feminist discourse out of her own desire to access a masculine model of freedom”<sup>19</sup> meaning an equal access an emphasis on education, the normalization of women getting into professions and interests both inside and outside the home, and the freedom from the negative connotative label of “feminine” and “woman.” This is the earliest influential account that advocated for women’s rights, and by rights meaning the acknowledgement

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<sup>16</sup> Bachiochi, *The Rights of Women*.

<sup>17</sup> Bachiochi.

<sup>18</sup> “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman | Summary, Importance, & Facts | Britannica.”

<sup>19</sup> Tauchert, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Accent of the Feminine*.

of women as rational beings, going away from the “bodily” connotation started by earlier philosophers. Women were cast away as beings of pure femininity, whereas femininity was considered almost to be a dirty word.<sup>20</sup> Going back to the idea of women being attached to their body and not their mind, Wollstonecraft was one of the first to identify this issue: “Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.”<sup>21</sup> The prison of femininity and womanly duty is one that is not rational, but according to Wollstonecraft purely aesthetic, crafted by men.<sup>22</sup> The wishes of Wollstonecraft as stated in *A Vindication* can be squared up in a single paragraph:

I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists. I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings are only the objects of pity, and that kind of love which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to point out that Wollstonecraft was not condemning femininity at all; rather, the attitudes surrounding the known traits of a woman. Softness, kindness, patience— all traits associated with traditional forms of weakness. She’s advocating for

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<sup>20</sup> Wollstonecraft and Todd, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*.

<sup>21</sup> Wollstonecraft and Todd.

<sup>22</sup> Wollstonecraft and Todd.

<sup>23</sup> Wollstonecraft and Todd.

love to be in all parts of the home, and for it to be applied for all parts of life. <sup>24</sup>We can learn from her today to love the feminine parts of ourselves while enjoying the legal freedoms, as well as the freedom from the societal boundaries that she mentioned. Of course, there is still work to be done for many stereotypes, in terms of being misunderstood in the workplace and also being understood as beings who cannot keep up with supporting a family on her own. From the perspective of today, regarding the problems surrounding women in the home versus in the workplace, Wollstonecraft paved the way for women to be thought of as rational beings, and being able to insert themselves into important conversations surrounding the world. Despite her misfortune in life, her words have made a lasting impact as the first woman in America to begin the fight for women's rights— even if she did not realize what that meant yet.

### *Sojourner Truth*

Jumping ahead to the 19th century, I want to focus next on Sojourner Truth. Most famous for her speech, “Ain't I a Woman,” Truth was an avid abolitionist and activist, and likely what we would consider today to be one of the first intersectional feminists. The first women's rights convention was in 1848, known as the Seneca Falls Convention put together by women such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. However, at this time the suffragettes focused just on the white woman's right to vote, and for the most part left out people of color. It surrounded many moral issues such as Prohibition and was largely led by religious groups like Quakers. In 1851, however, Sojourner Truth was invited to speak at the women's rights convention that was held in Akron, Ohio.

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<sup>24</sup> Bachiochi, *The Rights of Women*.

Born an enslaved person in 1797 on a New York estate, Sojourner Truth— then Isabella Baumfree— witnessed many sides of human nature. After running away in 1827 when the master of the estate refused to uphold a New York law banning slaves, she experienced a religious conversion and became a preacher, honing in her speaking skills.<sup>25</sup> The “Ain’t I a Woman” speech focuses on the strength of women, highlighting the philosophical fallacies often held against women as a sex.<sup>26</sup>

Even without a formal education, Truth appealed to the masses and soon became a known leader of both the feminist and abolitionist movements. She also lived a difficult life like Wollstonecraft, but in a much different way.<sup>27</sup> Her ideas surrounding family were twisted in her experiences, as she witnessed families being separated daily through the slave market. She was forced into an arranged marriage after being torn away by her chosen love, and bore many children. Her fight for equality was rare in that it was a fight for all— not just women and not just the African American population.<sup>28</sup> Philosophically, one can see that the fight was the demand of the same level of respect given to men, leading to the acceptance of women into more professions and eventually the right to the vote.<sup>29</sup> I have included a chunk of her most famed speech below to get a sense of the dialect, though simple, extremely powerful:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into

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<sup>25</sup> “Sojourner Truth | Biography, Accomplishments, & Facts | Britannica.”

<sup>26</sup> Stetson, *Glorying in Tribulation: The Life Work of Sojourner Truth*.

<sup>27</sup> Stetson.

<sup>28</sup> “Sojourner Truth | Biography, Accomplishments, & Facts | Britannica.”

<sup>29</sup> “Sojourner Truth (Educational Materials: African American Odyssey).”

barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?<sup>30</sup>

The first full paragraph fully acknowledges the root of the problem at hand— the capability of women to reach independence. She's not only showing that she's physically capable of many of the masculine tasks set before her, but that she already does, living a life suffering much more than the common man.

The next part of her speech focuses again on the issue of capability, this time mental capability: "Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [...]"intellect"<sup>31</sup> Sojourner calls out the all-too-often pompousness of many movements, because regardless of the intellect of women, it does not mean that they do not deserve respect and rights that the men have.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, with a metaphor and nod to Eve— whose fall into sin is often another reason that men use against women in the rights arguments— the speech reemphasized the mindset and physical potential of women. As stated in the first line of the speech, this event put society into a "fix," starting conversations surrounding women and helping others demand respect.

Overall, although Truth's contribution to the women's rights movement was not systemic, her courage to speak out against injustices against both women and the African

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<sup>30</sup> "Ain't I A Woman?"

<sup>31</sup> "Ain't I A Woman?"

<sup>32</sup> "Ain't I A Woman?" If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

American population proved to act as a catalyst and established her as a key player. Her talents as an orator convinced many of the American population to join her movements, and was a testament to the power of speech. Even though speech and the power of oratory is not the focus of this thesis, I wanted to include her because of her own focus on women's capability, which was often questioned in the personal and professional realms.

### *Susan B. Anthony*

One cannot survey the history of the women's rights movements without studying Susan B. Anthony. Like Sojourner Truth, Anthony was known to many for her speeches and ability to articulate her issues in a commanding way. She is considered to be one of the most influential and vital leaders of the suffrage movement,<sup>33</sup> and her work as well as Elizabeth Cady Stanton's marked the beginning of the first wave of feminism— one that focused specifically on the right to vote in the United States, and on the denial of giving women property or ownership if they were married. A Quaker, she was also influenced by her Christian beliefs where everyone is equal under the eyes of God, so she was also an avid abolitionist.<sup>34</sup> In fact, she started as an activist against slavery, traveling the country and giving speeches even though at the time it was considered to be inappropriate for women to be speaking publicly.

It was not until she met Elizabeth Cady Stanton, another activist and suffragist, when she really became active in the women's rights movement. For years the two of them pooled their efforts and gathered support for various social and moral reforms.

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<sup>33</sup> "Susan B. Anthony | Biography, Accomplishments, Dollar, Suffrage, & Facts | Britannica."

<sup>34</sup> "The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony by Ida Husted Harper."



Anthony went on to found many groups essential in the organization of the demand for acknowledgement, including the American Equal Rights Association, the Women's Loyal National League, and eventually the National Woman Suffrage Association after the 14th and 15th Amendments were passed, and a women's rights newspaper called the Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

It turns out that speaking in public was not the only form of civil disobedience that Anthony participated in. She was a force to be reckoned with, being arrested and convicted in 1872 for attempting to vote.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, she and Stanton appealed to California legislators in order to implement and introduce a bill to give women the right to vote. This bill was coined as the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, and eventually was ratified as the 19th Amendment 15 years after she died.

As for her family life, Susan grew up in Massachusetts and had six siblings. She added her own middle initial along with her sisters, and the B technically stood for "Brownwell" as an ode to her aunt who was also named Susan, but Anthony never used the full Brownwell name. Though her father was a Quaker and her mother was a Baptist, she grew up with mainly Quaker views that included temperance and abolition, which later extended into her work as an activist, obviously. Her family moved to New York to a farm where many other Quakers had moved, and that place became a local meeting place for certain social activities and reform meetings, and it was there that Anthony eventually met Frederick Douglass, who was said to become a long-time friend.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony by Ida Husted Harper."

<sup>36</sup> "The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony by Ida Husted Harper."

<sup>37</sup> "The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony by Ida Husted Harper."

In 1846, Anthony moved away from her family to become a headmistress at a school, where she was initially interested in equal pay, but not necessarily an equal right to the vote. This view eventually changed, and she became fast friends with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, where it is said that they had a working relationship for over fifty years.

<sup>38</sup>It was said that they were able to complement each other well with their specific skill sets, and it worked that they lived different family lives; Stanton married and had several children, while Anthony never married. This relationship represents a rare partnership of the time, and reflects the possibilities of different directions that women's lives can take when they decide to dedicate themselves to work, family, or work and family.

Anthony truly did dedicate herself to her life's work to attain equal rights for women, and wished "to live another century to see the fruition of all the work for women."<sup>39</sup> It makes me personally wonder if she would believe that there has been true fruition of that work today, if she were here. Overall, the addition of Anthony was due to her contributions to the suffrage movement, something essential in the establishment of agency and independence for women.

### *Betty Friedan*

We now move to the 20th century, a jump in feminist philosophy and into a separate part of the women's movement—when the 19th amendment was ratified, and after World War II and the period of intense industrialization. The 1950s marked a period of time in which traditionalist values set in and the boomer population was born. <sup>40</sup>This

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<sup>38</sup> "Susan B. Anthony | Biography, Accomplishments, Dollar, Suffrage, & Facts | Britannica."

<sup>39</sup> "Susan B. Anthony: Dollar, Quotes & Suffrage - HISTORY."

<sup>40</sup> Raybould, "The 1950s And The Myth Of The 'Traditional' Family."

was where many people had houses, the economy and education were booming, and traditional gender roles with women in the household and men in the workforce was the norm.<sup>41</sup> The term “housewife” was popularized during this time, with an aesthetic of the perfect wife living what was thought to be the life living in the American dream— a house on a lot with two kids, and a station wagon.<sup>42</sup> Betty Friedan, an activist in the second half of the 20th century, changed the American way of thinking surrounding women in her writings, specifically in her book the *Feminine Mystique*.

It is Friedan who is associated with the beginning and rise of the second wave of feminism, one that focused specifically on the position of women and where they belonged after they were “forced” back into the homes and out of the workforce post World War.<sup>43</sup> She identified what is known as “the problem with no name,” a chilling title to a plague she stated was affecting the common white middle class woman in her 20s— a yearning for something more, despite having what was deemed as the perfect life in the suburbs at home.<sup>44</sup> Society at the time was very materialistic, where women’s fulfillment was purely located within domestic life. What more could they want? According to Friedan, many women were feeling this sense of dissatisfaction, thinking something was wrong with them without being able to identify the problem; hence, the problem with no name:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning [that is, a longing] that women suffered in the middle of the 20th century in the United States. Each suburban [house]wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds,

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<sup>41</sup> Dirt, “The American Housewife.”

<sup>42</sup> Adams, *The Epic of America*.

<sup>43</sup> “Gender on the Home Front.”

<sup>44</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

shopped for groceries ... she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question — "Is this all?"<sup>45</sup>

Born in 1921 in Illinois, Friedan grew up in a religious Jewish home and was extremely academically inclined, winning several academic awards both in her secondary and undergraduate careers.<sup>46</sup> In college she was known to be involved with many Marxists, and became politically active as a vocal leftist who wrote for several publications.

The *Feminine Mystique* was based on the collection of interviews that Friedan collected at her fifteenth college reunion, where she asked her fellow female classmates about their current levels of satisfaction. After that she spent up to five years interviewing white, middle-class women, and explored the evolution of independence among women from the first half of the twentieth century to the seemingly submissive portrayal of women in the beginning of the second half. Published in 1963, it soon became one of the most popular and influential books of that time. It seemed to speak to housewives in a way that advertisers could not, by relaying real stories and feelings other women were scared to admit.<sup>47</sup>

After the publication, Friedan became an activist who worked well into the sixties and seventies, involving herself deeply into the pro-choice movement. However, with the transformation of the feminist movement into intersectionality, critics of her narrow viewpoint started to become louder, and she was eventually pushed out as a leader in the movement.<sup>48</sup> Since her perspective only applied to the white, young, middle class, female

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<sup>45</sup> Friedan.

<sup>46</sup> "Betty Friedan | Biography, Book, The Feminine Mystique, & Facts | Britannica."

<sup>47</sup> "Biography."

<sup>48</sup> "Betty Friedan | Biography, Book, The Feminine Mystique, & Facts | Britannica."

community, people called for a more diverse set of leaders. Even though she was pushed out as a leader, however, she still remained influential, and many referred to her as the “mother of the modern women’s movement.”<sup>49</sup>

Before her death, Friedan worked as a professor at New York University and University of Southern California, and served as a speaker on feminist issues for years as a guest speaker at conferences and events globally. She passed away from a heart condition in 2006, but her legacy has lived on. Overall, her contributions to the women’s rights movement served to widely influence the course of the second wave, one that is arguably the most important when discussing the relationship between women and the workforce.

### *Ruth Bader Ginsburg*

Moving into the third wave of feminism, it would be impossible to move on without mentioning the works and influence of former Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Her contributions, though extending miles past the reproductive rights movement, is mostly recognized for her fight for the “right to choose.”<sup>50</sup> Born in 1933 as Joan Ruth Bader in Brooklyn, New York, Ginsburg grew up in a devoted Jewish family and excelled in her education. She graduated from Cornell University in 1954, and was eventually married to her husband and lifelong friend Martin Ginsburg. Both of them attended Harvard Law School, where Ruth became the first woman on the editorial staff of the Harvard Law Review. However, when Martin was diagnosed with cancer, she left

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<sup>49</sup> “Biography.”

<sup>50</sup> “Ruth Bader Ginsburg | Biography & Facts | Britannica.”

Harvard to take care for her husband and children, eventually graduating from Columbia Law School.

After graduating Ginsburg experienced firsthand the struggle of trying to find a job as an attorney being both a woman and a mother. She clerked for a few years then eventually became a professor of law at Rutgers in 1963. It was here where she became immersed in the issues of gender discrimination and its relation to the law.<sup>51</sup>

The 1970s marked a period in which Ginsburg then began litigating for gender discrimination cases, eventually working her way up to the Supreme Court. In fact, she won five cases in front of the Supreme Court during her time as a litigator. Her time as a federal judge, then on the Supreme Court, was characterized by her wide interpretation of the Constitution and liberal leaning. As the second woman on the Supreme Court, she made herself known and became an icon for working mothers and families. The picture that is commonly associated with her was her addition of different collars to her robes, as well as the playful but dissonant relationships with her conservative colleagues.<sup>52</sup>

Concerning women, Ginsburg wrote multiple opinions on cases that specifically affected them, such as *United States v. Virginia*, where the Virginia Military Institute had violated the Equal Protection clause, and scathing dissenting opinions in *Gonzales v. Carhart* and *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire*. Ginsburg spent decades in the Court, spanning four presidencies. She fought for women and their rights individually, but also systemically. Her contributions are ones that far outreach many in this list, because of her contributions not only to women's history, but to her country's. We can learn from her

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<sup>51</sup> Bachiochi, *The Rights of Women*.

<sup>52</sup> Bachiochi.

attention to detail, quick wit and intellect, and refusal to quit. As the oldest remaining justice on the Court, she stayed until she died at ninety years old in 2020.

Although I barely skimmed the surface of the key players in the women's rights movement, the highlights of the contributions of these women prove to exemplify the evolution of feminism in the United States, and give historical context to the people who shaped many of the feminist attitudes we have today. One common theme one can notice about these women is the grit, outspokenness, and hard work dedicated to the fight for equality among women and men, despite some of their lives being centuries apart.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Philosophical View of the Waves of Feminism

The previous chapter covered the historical background of feminism with its key characters and their contributions to the movement. I now turn to feminism's philosophical underpinnings. As mentioned earlier, the ideas of women as "lesser than" began in ancient times with thinkers such as Aristotle. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Descartes also. However, the questioning of roles of women really began in the 18th century, with the beginning of what is known as the First Wave of feminism. There are four "waves" of feminism, with each wave focusing on a different struggle within the realm of women's rights.<sup>53</sup>

Philosophically, though, the social construction of feminist theory has a range of viewpoints, with six different categories: epistemology, ethics, phenomenology, aesthetics, metaphysics, and philosophy of science.<sup>54</sup> Each of these subfields concerns different ideas about women, but I will classify these subcategories under the umbrella of ideas about women in the professional realm. The philosophical history of feminism can still be thought of in the four waves of feminism, but instead of focusing on the context of the women who formed the ideas of the movement, let's focus on the ideas within the waves.

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<sup>53</sup> Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*.

<sup>54</sup> Mikkola, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender."



## *The First Wave*

The First Wave is an organized effort to promote women's voting rights– the international suffrage movement, led by women like Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The beginning of this movement is typically associated with the first Women's Rights Convention in 1848, but the ideas involved with this convention began decades earlier. Going back to Mary Wollstonecraft, philosophically the ideas of voting– or at least the idea of intellectual autonomy– really did begin in the 18th century.<sup>55</sup> The end of this era is marked with the establishment of the 19th Amendment in the U.S. Constitution, when women were officially given the legal right to vote. But why? Why did these women want the right to vote? If it is for what they considered to be intellectual autonomy, why would they want this at the time? Why was the vote the first marker for these women, and not economic independence, or change within societal norms surrounding property? What are the thoughts running through these revolutionaries' minds, and are they still applicable today?

For the suffragists, the vote represented much more than the ability to wait in line in order to check a name on a piece of paper. It meant the acknowledgement from society that women are citizens, not property, and the recognition of women as rational beings.<sup>56</sup> Instead of mere political mobilization, suffrage for women challenged the very ideas of inferior rationality, intellect, and capability, which all fall under the umbrella of epistemology in terms of feminist theory.<sup>57</sup> In fact, it was impossible to try to categorize all women under one political movement, because of the vast array of interests and moral

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<sup>55</sup> Riegel, *American Feminists*.

<sup>56</sup> Bachiochi, *The Rights of Women*.

<sup>57</sup> “Women's Suffrage | Definition, History, Causes, Effects, Leaders, & Facts | Britannica.”

end goals that women possessed, ranging from conservative to progressive. For example, the political goals of white women in the South at the time were very different (and still typically are) than the goals of black women whose parents were once enslaved. Structurally, therefore, voting seemed to be first in order of importance because through it women could have a say in the laws that affected their lives. It also marked the first structural step in considering women as rationally equal to men— again bringing into the question of women’s capability. Gaining the vote did not change anything for women within their profession. At this time “profession” was simply not a consideration for upper class women; the women who worked typically had to in order to survive, and they did so in places like textile factories and in schoolhouses.<sup>58</sup> However, the expansion of legal rights served to also expand agency, and the motivation to aspire for more.

An underlying philosophical idea within the suffrage movement was the desire for power, which of course was not an attribute traditionally ascribed to women. Power is associated with strength. Since weakness and feebleness were common characteristics of femininity, political and traditional ideas of power did not align with the typical cultural idea of women.<sup>59</sup> Women from the medieval times until the 20th century received their power from marriage,<sup>60</sup> and moved up in the world through the marriage of their children and other family members. Therefore, power for women was completely familial; and, as we will explore later, there has been power within the body and sexuality<sup>61</sup>. Importantly, the vote provides a sense of political power, no matter how small, because it is one of the most fundamental practices of democracy.

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<sup>58</sup> “Gender on the Home Front.”

<sup>59</sup> “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman | Summary, Importance, & Facts | Britannica.”

<sup>60</sup> Ruggles, “Patriarchy, Power, and Pay.”

<sup>61</sup> Beauvoir, Capisto-Borde, and Malovany-Chevallier, *The Second Sex*.

Another important aspect of the suffrage movement was the religious practices and goals of the women who participated, specifically within the WCTU, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement. One of the driving factors of suffragettes was the desire to push the moral agendas of their religions.<sup>62</sup> An example of this lies in the prohibition movement, as well as established charities funded by political entities. Wives and mothers advocated for the banning of alcohol due to the prevalence of absent alcoholic fathers. The WCTU was founded in 1874, and played an influential role in the participation of women in social causes. The goals of this organization, both then and now, are to apply Christian principles to social issues. The call of Christian mission in a broken world— things such as charity, empathy, and acknowledgement of sin— helped to launch the personal involvement of women who were otherwise politically uninvolved and uninterested.<sup>63</sup>

Overall, the basic ideas of the first wave of feminism were the philosophical notions of agency, power, and Christian charity.

### *The Second Wave*

The second wave of feminism is characterized by the second World War, materialism, and the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan.<sup>64</sup> This was the era of the Baby Boomers and the “perfect housewife.” This time was one of transition, because a lot of women who were in the workforce during World War II had to go back home which led to a lot

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<sup>62</sup> Gordon, *Women Torch-Bearers; the Story of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union*.

<sup>63</sup> Gordon.

<sup>64</sup> “Feminism: The Second Wave | National Women's History Museum.”

of disenfranchisement within the housewives of the United states.<sup>65</sup> Women wanted more legal rights, which included the right to have one's own checking account as well as credit cards without a husband's approval.<sup>66</sup> This second wave of feminism included philosophical ideas of the first wave-- agency power and Christian charity-- but it was also attuned to injustice and was fueled by other rights movements and rebellions that were happening in the United States.

Bored housewives were educating their daughters, which meant that more and more women were going to college and learning about a narrative that wasn't written for them by men.<sup>67</sup> This is the era that people often associate with the stereotype of feminists today: bra burners, or man-haters. Instead of the vote, women wanted employment rights, respect, and more equality under the law. This also began the debate over reproductive rights and the sexual revolution—a kind of liberation for women to have the same sexual freedoms that men do.<sup>68</sup>

Traditionally, the second wave of feminism is the most popular wave, and mostly what people think of when they think of the movement itself. If this movement were a television show, champions such as Simone de Beauvoir, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Gloria Steinem would star in this episode. The second wave also seems to be the beginning of the problem that will be discussed later— that women can and should do it all— in both private and public life. Philosophically, the *Feminine Mystique* presented a

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<sup>65</sup> “Gender on the Home Front.”

<sup>66</sup> “Feminism: The Second Wave | National Women’s History Museum.”

<sup>67</sup> Ware, “Writing Women’s Lives.”

<sup>68</sup> “Feminism: The Second Wave | National Women’s History Museum.”

problem, and the perceived solution to this problem was paid labor.<sup>69</sup> By 1985 the workforce went from twenty percent women to fifty percent.<sup>70</sup>

Shifting away from religion and into a much more secular point of view, women demanded a deeper sense of agency and power, but also respect and equality. This marks the point in history where the true question of inequality comes into play. In 1963 Congress had passed the Equal Pay Act, which made discrimination against women in the workplace illegal;<sup>71</sup> however, there were still many workplaces practices that favored men over women and offered higher wages for men.<sup>72</sup> Even given the legal implications of equality, there were loopholes in the form of “occupational segregation” especially amongst the demand for part-time work for mothers. In some respects, this appeared to be another case of “separate but equal.”<sup>73</sup>

The demand for tangible and intangible equality boiled down to the demand for respect amongst women, both in the workplace and at home. Women wanted respect for the “seriousness” of their careers, not just as stepping stones before children but as real professions.<sup>74</sup> They wanted to be included in important conversations– not just the ones in the office but also on the golf course, the bar lounge, and during smoking breaks. Respect and equality are the overarching philosophical themes of the second movement, because the legal standards of employment proved to be not enough, but the bare minimum. Among this was the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s,

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<sup>69</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

<sup>70</sup> Bachiochi, *The Rights of Women*.

<sup>71</sup> “The Equal Pay Act of 1963.”

<sup>72</sup> Sattari, “Dismantling ‘Benevolent’ Sexism.”

<sup>73</sup> “Feminism - The Second Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

<sup>74</sup> Lear, “The Second Feminist Wave.”

fought for by white and black feminists alike, and fought against by many conservative groups.<sup>75</sup>

The other side of this second wave feminism was a movement that championed domesticity. Proponents of this alternate movement believed that working in the home was a privilege and mark of prosperity for women. Although Friedan did well in identifying the “problem with no name” she neglected to mention the large group of women who were satisfied in their roles— mostly conservative women<sup>76</sup>. Friedan has been largely criticized over the years for her lack of inclusion of experiences— and rightly so, but what is often overlooked is that many women wanted to stay home with children and keep a household as a profession, but simply did not (and do not) have the means to do so. The American Dream in the second half of the twentieth century consisted of a white picket fence, four-bedroom home, and the typical suburban lifestyle.<sup>77</sup> With that came financial stability, or at least the idea of it. Along with that came the ideal of a housewife who had dinner on the table ready for the husband when he got home.

During that time (and now) there were genuinely women whose dream is to stay home and raise children by accessing their strength of maternal instinct. The push toward women in the workforce exemplified the idea that women could embody the masculine attribute of “strength.” But this demand created a divide among women and within the women’s movement that was not anticipated.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “Equal Rights Amendment.”

<sup>76</sup> Bachiochi, *The Rights of Women*.

<sup>77</sup> Adams, *The Epic of America*.

<sup>78</sup> “Equal Rights Amendment.”

### *The Third Wave*

In the third wave of feminism, the next generation of feminists changed their focus from the workplace into the realm of reproductive rights. The work done by their mothers opened doors into more economic opportunity and economic freedom, and raised them to be curious and question the status quo. This led the women of the third wave to not only question the system of patriarchy and rebel against it, but start to shatter it altogether, moving away from an already-built system.<sup>79</sup>

The 1990s was a period in which systemic injustices were finally being unveiled, and the understanding of them as a part of society instead of separate acts of discrimination. This included racism, classism, and sexism.<sup>80</sup> Part of the system that this movement hoped to shatter was the concept of gender, which is still being questioned today. Presented as a social construct, gender is separated from sex, and is considered to be a spectrum by many.<sup>81</sup> The sexual liberation part of the second wave paved the way for the question regarding gender. Therefore, with the themes of sexual liberation, gender, and reproductive rights on the forefront of the third wave of feminism, the philosophical ideas of this movement turned toward subjectivity and— a deeper dive into what it means to be a woman, or a fetus. It also focused on the fight against stereotypes. The 1990s marked the creation of women’s or gender studies programs within undergraduate curricula, exploring definitions and trying to understand the definition of “femininity,” ‘woman,’ and other gendered words.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> “Feminism - The Third Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

<sup>80</sup> “Feminism - The Third Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

<sup>81</sup> “Feminism - The Third Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

<sup>82</sup> Evans, *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms*.

By redefining what it meant to be a woman, new empowered figures came about in the feminine role. Pop divas such as Whitney Houston, Madonna, and Cher were seen as powerful figures— even role models— and other forms of media started to reflect this shift in society with more female-centric productions, in both kid-centric and mature content. Examples of this include franchises such as *Sex and the City*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and characters in movies such as *Mulan* (Mulan), *Terminator 2* (Sarah Conner), and *Silence of the Lambs* (Clarice Starling).<sup>83</sup>

Although the court cases *Roe v Wade* and *Griswold v Connecticut* were argued and settled during the 2nd wave of feminism, the backlash against these cases in the form of the “pro-life” movement and the fight to keep these rulings in place for the “pro-choice” movement came about during the third wave and well into the fourth wave, until the case was struck down in 2022 through *Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. The subjectivity of the definition of choice is questioned during this period, both legally and philosophically, and whether the choice of the body was constitutional. This argument and fight will likely not see the ending in the near future. A plethora of lawsuits attempting to strike down *Roe v Wade* came about in the next few decades, with moral politics on both sides— the mother over a child/fetus, and vice versa.<sup>84</sup>

Another facet of the 3rd wave that was different than the other waves was the intersectionality and inclusivity of this movement, including the concepts of gender, class, race, and other inequities that they believed were affected by the “system,” but

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<sup>83</sup> “Feminism - The Third Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

<sup>84</sup> Weitz and Yanow, “Implications of the Federal Abortion Ban for Women’s Health in the United States.”



most of all, focusing on the inclusion of women of color, who had previously been largely left out of the feminist realms. Women's rights had taken a turn towards general injustice, as articulated by writers such as Judith Butler and bell hooks. A stark difference from the often-controversial suffrage movement— controversial for their exclusion of everyone except upper class white women— inclusion became an overarching theme for the men and women of the third wave.<sup>85</sup>

One of the largest critics of the 3rd wave of feminism was the believers in what is called “post-feminism,” where they worked under the impression that since there was a lot of legal progress made in women's rights, that there was no longer a need for a feminist movement. The label of post-feminist applies to many women who identify as more politically or personally conservative, and who want to distance themselves from the “man-hating” stereotype.<sup>86</sup> This is a concept I want to push back against. I am including this for historical purposes, and to explore the spectrum of feminism, but post-feminism is a leg in both worlds that do not seem to align. If someone believes themselves to be a postfeminist simply because they think that other feminists are man-haters, then they do not understand the movement of women's rights in the first place. Going back to the definition mentioned in the first chapter, feminism is the recognition of the subjugation of women, and the efforts to remedy this.

Another definition could be the acknowledgement that men and women deserve equal opportunity in professional and public/private settings. Post-feminists might also have a spectrum of beliefs, but if the fundamental baseline of one ends in equality, it is still considered to be feminism. However, what I do understand about post-feminism is

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<sup>85</sup> “What Is ‘Intersectional Feminism’?”

<sup>86</sup> “Feminism - The Third Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

the prudence that comes with asking the question, “what is next?” It can be argued that the values of feminism and the consequences of the movement— though for the most part good— have contributed now to the toxic work culture against mothers, or that everyone is expected to take on more masculine attributes and lifestyles in order to keep up with their careers. Is that true equality?

### *The Fourth Wave*

The fourth and final wave of feminism— or at least current wave— started around 2012 and focuses on the sexual liberation and calling out of sexual exploitation and harassment within workplaces, taken control of by social media and online platforms.<sup>87</sup> With the rapid stratification of information caused by the Internet, it made it much easier to connect and support women’s rights movements across the world, that cover a plethora of rights and experiences. One of the biggest parts of the fourth wave has been the #MeToo movement. This was an online social movement starting on Twitter focusing on exposing various accounts of sexual harassment, exploitation and even assault within the workplace. The original tweet and trend was focused specifically on these things happening in Hollywood; however, this trend ended up spreading across the world, but mostly in the workplaces of the United States. Women were demanding respect, recognition, and mostly justice in their profession.<sup>88</sup> Celebrities such as Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and America’s beloved Bill Cosby fell from their pedestals as they were uncovered for multiple accounts of using their power over vulnerable men and women.

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<sup>87</sup> “Feminism - The Fourth Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

<sup>88</sup> “Feminism - The Fourth Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

MeToo began with the story of Tarana Burke, a woman who was working as a summer camp director and found out that one of her campers had been a survivor of sexual abuse. In this conversation with this young woman, Burke— also a survivor— looked at her, and said “me too.” She used this phrase in multiple instances over the next few decades, but it did not become a real campaign until 2007, and did not go viral until 2017 with the hashtag #metoo. The phrase became synonymous with healing, community, and as a platform for others to be able to share their encounters without being afraid of repercussions.<sup>89</sup>

Specifically after the Weinstein scandal came out on the Internet, the most viral part of the conversation started. Alyssa Milano, an actress, tweeted ““If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” Within twenty-four hours, there were twelve million accounts of interaction with this tweet, including likes and posts. The impact of this was hard to deny, and in fact the women of the MeToo movement were named Time Person of the Year as a global movement in 2017.<sup>90</sup>

With the fourth wave still considered to be happening, there are multiple accounts of how the movement is moving into the future, or whether or not it’s happening at all. The characterization of this most recent wave has definitely been most influenced by the MeToo movement, meaning that many companies have begun to do more internal investigations regarding complaints of sexual harassment, taking it more seriously in general. Now in 2023, we are in a post-Roe, post-COVID isolation stage that leaves people asking the question— where do we go from here? With a specific division among

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<sup>89</sup> “Feminism - The Fourth Wave of Feminism | Britannica.”

<sup>90</sup> Corbett, “#MeToo Five Years Later.”

women in the abortion issue, and a huge portion of women leaving the workforce due to a lack of childcare from the pandemic, this next decade will likely mark a general transition into a cultural reset surrounding women, the workplace, and general feminism. It will be interesting to see if the trends will become more of a repeat of history, or if they will shift completely.

For example, more workplaces are being forced to consider the personal lives of their workers due to COVID and the labor shortage, with many shifting to offer better benefits and more relaxed parental policies. This may be due to a shift of cultural values, away from the American work culture, or it could be a plethora of other things including general burnout or a wake-up call to spend time with family from the pandemic. For women, especially the new generation of women transitioning from education to the working world, the development of their (and mine) values will likely determine the direction of education, people in the homes, childcare trends, and workplace demographics.

Philosophically, what we have now for the women's movement and what is "right" for a woman's life is a spectrum of ideologies, viewpoints, and self-help books to achieve happiness as a professional and a wife, daughter, mother, etc. The problem, though, is that we live in a culture of toxic positivity where it is expected and encouraged of women to not just be a thriving professional who is killing it in her designer pantsuit, but also an involved mother whose kids come above all else.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Myth of Work/Life Balance

In this third and final chapter, I build on the previous chapters to argue that work/life balance for women today is a myth. We have reached a place in the American culture of individualism and feminism that has made us believe that we can do whatever we want and be successful at it, as long as we put in enough effort. This has led to a toxic, overworked generation of parents who are struggling to keep up with the expectations from work, home, and their community. This especially applied to women. Right now, the self-help industry in the US amounts to more than ten billion dollars.<sup>91</sup> People are finding more ways to be productive— more ways to make use of their time and be wise about it. But why do people want more time in their day? Is it to do more work? No. People strive to find a balance between their professional and personal life because they want to be happy— to live fulfilling lives that lead to some sort of satisfaction.

In a recent Harvard study on happiness— one of the longest running in history— the happiest subjects are those who have developed the highest quality relationships, whether those are with family, friends, or merely a culmination of casual, positive connections.<sup>92</sup> Physical health is a big indicator in overall satisfaction, but relationships even affect that. Robert Waldinger, current director of this study, has emphasized the importance of

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<sup>91</sup> “\$10.4 Billion Self-Improvement Market Pivots to Virtual Delivery During the Pandemic.”

<sup>92</sup> Mineo, Liz. “Over Nearly 80 Years, Harvard Study Has Been Showing How to Live a Healthy and Happy Life.”

focusing on the quality of relationships within one's life.<sup>93</sup><sup>94</sup> There are relationships to be found in work, to be sure; however, it is obvious that Waldinger is emphasizing the value of time spent—with loved ones. Happiness seems to correlate with more time with those family and friends and less time at the office.

### *Myth*

First, in order to argue that something is a myth we need to define the word myth in the context of feminism and the modern workplace. In this instance, myth is “a widely held but false belief or idea,” a definition taken from the Oxford dictionary.<sup>95</sup> I argue that the phrase “work-life balance” itself is a myth, because there is a widely held belief that in order to be successful in the professional and personal realm, people need to balance both parts in the twenty-four hours that everyone has access to. To see evidence of this, one only needs to look at the self-help industry. On GoodReads alone, the section under Work Life Balance books includes hundreds of results.<sup>96</sup> With billions of dollars in this industry, it is said that women make up over three fourths of the customer base for self-help<sup>97</sup>. Of course, this includes the fitness industry, as well as emotional and mental wellbeing, but it goes to show that women everywhere are looking for to the problem of “balance.”

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<sup>93</sup> Mineo.

<sup>94</sup> “loneliness kills. Taking care of your body is important, but tending to your relationships is a form of self-care too. That, I think, is the revelation.” -Robert Waldinger, quote to Harvard Gazette: Mineo.

<sup>95</sup> “Myth.”

<sup>96</sup> “Work Life Balance Books.”

<sup>97</sup> “\$10.4 Billion Self-Improvement Market Pivots to Virtual Delivery During the Pandemic.”

The problem with “balance” is that it implies that there are two separate parts of life, each opposed to the other. Balance also implies that there is a formula to life— that if one figures out the right ingredients, and the right amount of those ingredients, then she could reach a sort of sustained satisfaction. It also fails to address the fact that with time, personal and professional realms constantly change, whether that is because of job changes, the addition of children, or general financial strains. Life is about change, not balance, and those changes happen at different times for each individual person.

Instead of seeking an elusive balance, people should first explore their personal values and the relative weights of those values—whether these are family, career, religious life, or leisure. Balance implies a dichotomy, which means that we usually consider work and life as two separate aspects of a person. However, I think we can agree that human beings live “personal lives” *and* they also work. They should therefore not consider strict dichotomies between work and life. Instead they should consider the boundaries they want to set in the different parts of their lives, taking account of their own human finitude.

The crucial question ought to be, therefore, “how might we find enduring satisfaction in our lives?” Women are in a continual search for perfect “balance” not because they want to be as productive as possible, but because they want fulfillment, whether that results from the approval of their supervisors, in personal achievement, or in the love of family. What makes all of this difficult (and what makes balance impossible) is that there is a culture of human progress that encourages perfection without the support it requires.

By shifting this framework and rhetoric, it can help us in our journey of trying to understand each of our own lives and their frameworks. As I will show below, I will propose not a solution, but steps to address these issues and steps that my generation can take in order to reach the goal they are attempting to reach when they use the phrase “work/life balance.” In order to reach this goal for women—especially new workers in this generation— this means shifting the narrative into a systemic and personal rewrite where the culture supports working women, with results that are both tangible and intangible.

### *Tangible Obstacles*

As previously stated, what makes the goal of work/life balance improbable is due to the lack of support in American culture, both in intangible and tangible ways. Right now, the culture works against working women tangibly. The perfect example of this problem appears in Arlie Hochschild’s influential *The Second Shift*, which characterizes the double burden against mothers.<sup>98</sup> When working fathers end their shift at 5PM, working mothers move right on to their second shift, from 5-9. Whether that is making dinner, cleaning up, doing homework with the kids, or getting them ready for bed, according to this account mothers in the 21st century are tasked with two jobs— one at home and one in the workplace.<sup>99</sup> Hochschild’s argument describes how women are still fighting, not

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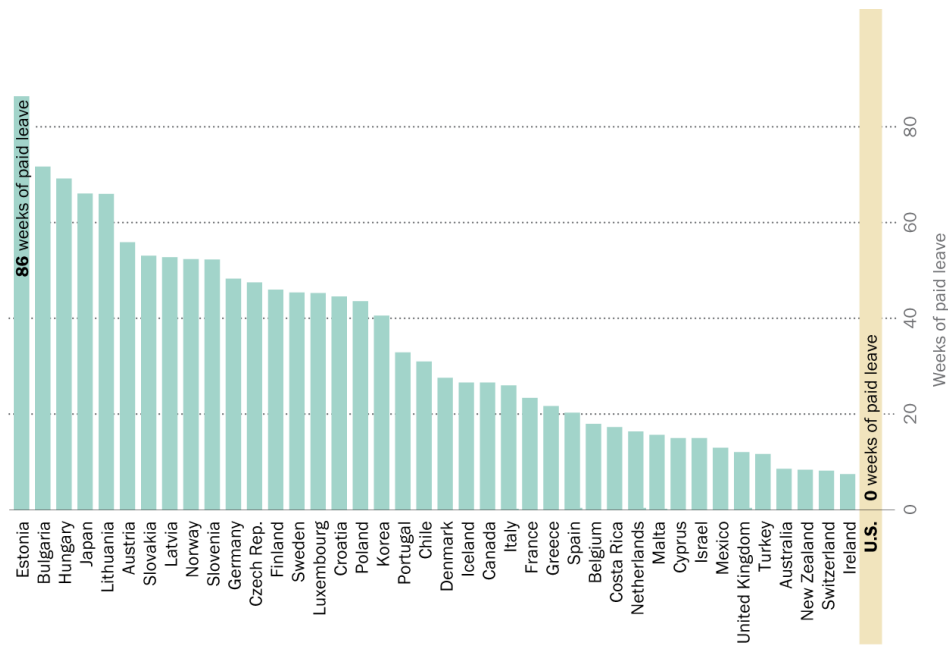
<sup>98</sup> Hochschild, *The Second Shift*.

<sup>99</sup> “Formerly, many men dominated women within marriage. Now, despite a much wider acceptance of women as workers, men dominate women anonymously outside the marriage. Patriarchy has not disappeared; it has changed form. In the old form, women were forced to obey an overbearing husband in the privacy of an unjust marriage. In the new form, the working single mother is economically abandoned by her former husband and ignored by a patriarchal society at large.” Hochschild, 2003



necessarily for civil liberties, but for the same acknowledgement and respect as their male counterparts within a working culture.

In some instances, the culture works against women by refusing to adequately support them. The “motherhood penalty,” consists of policies in the United States that fail to support working mothers and working fathers.<sup>100</sup> There are three main ways that both federal and local governments, as well as the economy more generally, fail to support working mothers: parental leave, childcare, and wage gaps.



First, The United States is one of the only developed countries in the world that does not have a federal policy that enforces paid parental leave— only six weeks unpaid.

To show how far behind we are, Pew Research Center has created a chart with the parental leave of 41 countries, as shown above, with the United States in dead last.<sup>101</sup>

Even though it is estimated that around 72% of moms in the country are also working,

<sup>100</sup> “The Motherhood Penalty.”

<sup>101</sup> Livingston and Thomas, “Among 41 Countries, Only U.S. Lacks Paid Parental Leave.”

because of the lack of federal support many women are either forced to leave their jobs or take a substantial pay cut because they are recovering from giving birth and learning to take care of a newborn.<sup>102</sup> Even with 6 weeks of unpaid leave, that is not nearly enough. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Pediatric Policy Council both recommend providing 12 weeks of paid leave.<sup>103</sup> With the average cost of a child being \$17,000 per year, and the US median household income around \$75,000, parents need all the help they can get when spending 23% of their income on one child.<sup>104</sup>

Along with paid parental leave, there is a lack of adequate, affordable childcare to accommodate working parents. Since the pandemic, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimate that there are 100,000 fewer workers in the childcare industry than before, reducing the entire industry by almost 10 percent.<sup>105</sup> There are many reasons for this, but the biggest is that roughly 98% of all other industries pay more than childcare. The New York Times explained this issue in 2022 in an article written by Dana Goldstein, who interviewed mothers and childcare workers alike to get to the bottom of the issue. What she found was a conundrum— parents cannot afford the kind of childcare that pays people livable wages.<sup>106</sup> If parents cannot afford adequate childcare, in most cases it would be the mother who leaves her job to take care of the children, meaning that a woman often

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<sup>102</sup> “The Motherhood Penalty.”

<sup>103</sup> Wakeman, “What Working Women Need to Know About Maternity Leave.”

<sup>104</sup> Lino, “Expenditures on Children by Families, 2015.”

<sup>105</sup> Goldstein, “Why You Can’t Find Child Care.”

<sup>106</sup> “The mathematics of child care are not easy to solve, in part because programs run on such tight margins. In Maryland, center directors like Ms. Reyes earn an average of \$41,000 a year. And Ms. Reyes cannot simply raise tuition in order to pay herself or her workers more; child care is already a leading household expense and a service that is unaffordable for 60 percent of the families who need it” Goldstein, 2022.

cannot afford to dedicate the time and effort for promotion to high-level positions when her priority is the family.

With America's "nose-to-the-grindstone" attitude, and employers who will most likely choose a worker who goes above and beyond to be promoted, women are left at a disadvantage because of the duties at home and a lack of affordable, adequate childcare. Even women who work from home suffer professionally, with interruptions during meetings, requests from their children, and lack of attention to work. A 2020 poll found that kids interrupt their telecommuting parents about 25 times a week.<sup>107</sup> These statistics offer a grim picture of the daily struggles that come from a lack of support for working parents.

The motherhood penalty is seen not only through the wage gap among all women, but specifically among mothers. In fact, statistics show that men who become fathers are more likely to receive promotions and wages, whereas mothers are much more likely to receive a pay cut, or are less likely to be hired: "[B]etween two years before the birth of a couple's first child and a year after, the earnings gap between opposite-sex spouses doubles. The gap continues to grow until that child reaches age 10. Although it narrows after that, it never disappears completely."<sup>108</sup> Although much of the motherhood penalty represents stereotypes and attitudes that would be considered intangible, it is appropriate to include this in this section because of the tangible results that actively prevent opportunities for working mothers, such as a prevention of hiring due to these stereotypes—working mothers are unreliable and less productive— and consistent lack of compensation.

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<sup>107</sup> Team, "WFH, Remote Learning, & Child Care."

<sup>108</sup> "The Motherhood Penalty."

Due to the lack of paid parental leave, the lack of adequate, affordable childcare, and the motherhood penalty shown in the wage gap, it is extremely difficult for working mothers to reach the kind of productivity they desire in both realms of their lives.

### *Intangible Obstacles*

There are also intangible obstacles for working mothers and women in the workplace. I will examine three separate problems: the devaluation of femininity and female-dominated workplaces, attitudes against working mothers, and the American exceptionalism and attitudes of capitalism that often drive the workforce. Taken together, these explain the difficulty of demanding respect in the workplace and even in the home.

First, although there has been major progress regarding women in leadership roles in what have historically been male-dominated fields, this progress has been skewed due to the lack of desegregation of female-dominated fields. Where women have been recently saturating the demographics of workforces such as business and STEM professions, men have not done the opposite. Women now dominate college campuses in most majors, but there has not been a shift in the number of men in fields that are regarded as more feminine, such as sociology, English, teaching, and nursing.<sup>109</sup> Why is this the case? According to Paula England, this is due to a historical devaluation of femininity. Instead of de-stigmatization of both genders, and embrace of flipped feminine and masculine qualities, systemically there has only been an embrace of women taking on masculine forms of themselves.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> England, “The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled.”

<sup>110</sup> England.

The corporate world values behaviors that are seen as more masculine, like aggressive deal-making, assertion, and independence.<sup>111</sup> These are what is known as “masculine defaults,” or “a form of gender bias in which characteristics and behaviors typically associated with men are rewarded and considered standard practice.”<sup>112</sup> These jobs that are aligned with what is considered to be masculine— business, law, and STEM— ironically also typically have the highest salaries. England found that in most cases, women would often seek these jobs for income alone.<sup>113</sup>

By contrast, female-dominated jobs have been devalued, leading women to be pushed into male-dominated fields that are white-collar. Work such as childcare and teaching have infamously low salary opportunities. This leads to a difficult truth: “Men lose money and suffer cultural disapproval when they choose traditionally female-dominated fields; they have little incentive to transgress gender boundaries.”<sup>114</sup> This begs the question: just how far has progress in professional feminism been made when femininity is still punished? Or is this progress “uneven” or “stalled” as England suggests?

The work in the home is devalued as well. Cooking and cleaning are still largely considered “women’s work.”<sup>115</sup> Social incentives are given to children who show masculine traits as they grow up. England gives a few examples of this: “parents are more likely to give girls “boy” toys such as Legos than they are to give dolls to their sons. Girls have increased their participation in sports more than boys have taken up cheerleading or

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<sup>111</sup> England.

<sup>112</sup> Sapna Cheryan and Markus, “Rooting Out the Masculine Defaults in Your Workplace.”

<sup>113</sup> England, “The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled.”

<sup>114</sup> England.

<sup>115</sup> England.

ballet.”<sup>116</sup> Masculinity is taught in homes; where girls are taught to be strong, assertive, and play sports as they grow up, boys are much less likely to be encouraged in more feminine activities or qualities. Emotional vulnerability, gentleness, and compassion are tools that are often overlooked both in the personal and professional realm, because they are considered more feminine.

Secondly, the culture works against women in an intangible way through general attitudes against working mothers, and stereotypes that combine with implicit bias. General stereotypes are harmful because they affect the wellbeing and perception of a woman, especially one who is trying to take on more than one role. Of course, one can never get away from personal bias, but among working mothers there seem to be a few harmful stereotypes that lead to comments being made in the workplace:<sup>117</sup>

1. They care about the workplace more than their children
2. They have messy homes
3. They are unreliable
4. They don't like Stay At Home Moms
5. They will take lots of time off

As for capitalism, the American dream is something that is perceived to be attainable for everyone, no matter where one comes from or who they are. That's kind of the whole deal— people can show up, and if they work hard and keep their head down, they too can get a white-picket fence, two kids and equality in opportunity and rights as protected under the Constitution. However, it is not at all as simple as that. The systemic

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<sup>116</sup> England.

<sup>117</sup> “6 Working Mom Stereotypes That We Need To Break Away From.”

inequalities that have persisted and have been created in systems such as capitalism have prevented this dream to become a reality for everyone. American exceptionalism, and the cultivated culture of productivity, have turned the American workforce into zombies and slaves to their income as well as their bosses.<sup>118</sup>

With the success of women being integrated into the corporate and STEM world, what has also been ingrained into women is the attitude that the workplace does come first, no matter the case. This can persist in multiple ways, including the expectation of staying at the office until the boss leaves, or not using up any sick days even though you are afforded the opportunity to do so. Unrealistic expectations in the workplace do not just hurt the working mothers, but the overall wellbeing of its workers. This can result in burnout, imposter syndrome, and the often joked-about-but-persisting issue of what's called "Sunday Scaries": a concept where Sunday evenings are full of dread in anticipation of going back to work on Monday morning after the weekend and facing the week of work ahead of them. This attitude is unique in the United States, where productivity— as well as liberal individualism— is king. Paula England comments on this, stating that it also perpetuates an attitude of gender essentialism, where progress is made within the women's movement but people are not motivated to invest in gender differentialism: "Gender essentialism encourages traditional choices and leads women to see previous cohorts of women of their social class as the reference point from which they seek upward mobility."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> England, "The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled."

<sup>119</sup> England.

### *My Personal Perspective*

With both the tangible and intangible ways of how the current culture fails to support women explained, it is now time to shift to my own personal perspective, and my opinion on how women of my generation can take the steps to try to achieve what is hoped for when pursuing what we think of as work/life balance. First, it is important to explain what exactly that goal is for people, specifically women. I argue that work/life balance is presented as a life formula to use when trying to achieve maximum productivity, happiness, and overall satisfaction when juggling multiple roles in one's life. However, in order to jump the obstacles put in front of women, both systemic and individual, there requires a shift in mindset towards this goal. That mindset is one that realizes that there will never be a point in one's life where they will "achieve" their way to happiness— satisfaction is something that is generally intrinsic, after one can reach a certain point of life needs.

After this, it is not materialistic goods, professional achievements, and a mastery of parenting or partnership that will make someone reach a kind of human nirvana. The beauty of humanity lies in its finiteness. I know this will be an unpopular opinion, but this comes from the Christian idea that we can do "all things" not through ourselves, but through the acceptance of Jesus Christ into our hearts. Rather, one should go into life with the understanding of the ebbs and flows of life, and the intellectual humility that is enough to request help when needed.

This is something that I personally struggle with, but am trying to come to terms with in many regards— one of those wake-up calls being this thesis. This is not a "can-do" attitude; in fact, it's almost the opposite. This may seem negative, but rather it's an



argument to “find the significance in being insignificant” or truly, just try your best and find your self-worth not through achievements. Now, before you give up and live your life, understand that there are ways to navigate the treacherous landscape that was just laid out. I am hoping I can provide some insight into what to support, what to look for, and what to rely on in order for women to live their life in a way that they deem successful based on their own values. I am no expert, but as someone who deeply cares about her vocation, career, and future potential family all in one, all I can offer is a framework that I hope to pursue in my own life as a Christian feminist.

First, what is most important is to figure out your own values, whether that be a life that includes a high-stakes career, such as law or medicine, or something more manageable in order to eventually raise a family, assuming that those reading this are women who have the means to be able to choose their own paths in this regard. This is something that can be more flexible the further in the career someone typically is, because of the buildup of rapport, job stability, and skill.

Second, what is essential in building a life that is supported in the professional and personal sense is finding a partner who supports those vocational passions of yours, and shares the values of the idea of family that you want to build. Typically, this means finding a partner who has the compassion to share the housework and childcare; utilizing the strengths and weaknesses of each partner by refusing to let one do all of the tasks. In more plain text, finding a husband who will not see watching their own children as “babysitting” or refusing to do housework because they “cannot do it as well as you.” Relationships are often described to be thought of as 50/50, but I want to fight against this concept. Rather, I think of relationships and how they ebb and flow in energy

depending on the course of each partner's life, meaning that it can sometimes be 70/30 or 20/80, but that each member of the relationship will do their best to give 100%.

Next, with the former concept of "asking for help" in mind, it is my belief that it is extremely important to utilize the resources around you— especially in community. Many women typically have more people in their lives than they think who are willing to provide support—whether that be emotionally or physically through tasks like carpooling and babysitting— but are expected to mind their business and suffer alone. However, the foundation of community can be found in many places, but mostly in five different instances in the United States: the home, extended family, the workplace, church (or general third place), and other more casual instances of community where people are able to connect with one another.

The home is in reference mostly to the partner, but also dependent on the way the household is built; cultures with multiple generations in their homes typically place an emphasis on having a close family unit, one where support is continuous within the home. As for the extended family, I am a huge advocate for living close to siblings and parents when starting a family if possible, but I also understand that there are multiple reasons for multiple people as to why that is not a sustainable option.

The workplace is also essential for the support of personal values, believe it or not. If one can afford it, they should seek out employment in places that are shifting towards benefits that support working parents, and communicate to the best of their ability their values and intentions when accepting a position. This may lie outside of professional norms, but in today's day and age, transparency is proving to be one of the best tools that both the employee and employer can use in order to tackle workplace

inequity and support each other. Things like conversations surrounding salary comparisons, benefits, and workplace expectations should not be taboo in the office, because even if they are not perceived to be polite the lack of them perpetuates the type of disparities we are fighting against.

Places of worship do not only provide spiritual solitude, but social capital and connections that can help to support women with children and no children alike. Programs such as Mothers Day Out, nursery, and Sunday School are in place to help to support parents, and more than often there are church programs available to assist families in need, whether that be financially or with the other resources available to them such as volunteers, a car, or counseling.

Other than these three, I highly encourage women to utilize the community they have before them. Neighbors that you trust, friends, coworkers, and people that you see everyday are likely more than happy to provide support when needed; all you have to do is put your pride aside and ask. There is a reason that the phrase “it takes a village” is so popular when discussing the issue of raising children. However, it also takes a village to support yourself, so reliance on community and relationships is essential in life satisfaction and general success in managing the multiple complicated facets of life.

### *Conclusion*

On a positive note, there are multiple systemic policies that could help make the landscape for working women much more manageable; and as much as I have been arguing for a shift in the culture, there are already movements in place to make this happen. We are already seeing the benefits of laws where governments on both the state

and federal level are adapting to the shift in attitudes that benefit working mothers and fathers. For example, we are still feeling the effects of the labor shortage after COVID isolation in 2020. What is now widely known as the Great Resignation, by December 2021 over 4 million people left their jobs.<sup>120</sup> The reasons for this large exit from the workforce are due to a plethora of reasons, including effects of COVID, but the Harvard Business Review narrows it down to what they call the “5 R’s:” retirement, relocation, reconsideration, reshuffling, and reluctance.<sup>121</sup> Overall, though, what needs to be taken out of this data and idea is that companies now are being forced to take a second look at their policies, and how they can make their positions more desirable in order to prevent a slowdown in business.<sup>122</sup> The effect in the economy from the pandemic benefits working mothers, because it gives them leverage to be able to negotiate for better working conditions when the company/employer is desperate for workers.

With over 10 million current job openings in the US, it’s become an economic priority to prioritize employees’ needs. There are currently quite a few propositions in the world of government in order to remedy this issue. One of the most popular shifts has been the switch from in-person roles to remote positions, where people can stay home, watch their kids, and continue to be productive and be successful within their work roles. After the worst rounds of COVID, many companies and organizations made the switch to

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<sup>120</sup> Parker and Horowitz, “Majority of Workers Who Quit a Job in 2021 Cite Low Pay, No Opportunities for Advancement, Feeling Disrespected.”

<sup>121</sup> “The Great Resignation Didn’t Start with the Pandemic.”

<sup>122</sup> “Workers are retiring in greater numbers but aren’t relocating in large numbers; they’re reconsidering their work-life balance and care roles; they’re making localized switches among industries, or reshuffling, rather than exiting the labor market entirely; and, because of pandemic-related fears, they’re demonstrating a reluctance to return to in-person jobs.” Fuller et al. 2022.

be hybrid instead of transitioning back to full time in-person, because they realized it was a pro for everyone— employees and employers. Of course, the purpose of hybrid roles is not to use the time to slack off, but the productivity of at-home roles have proven to be just as prevalent as in-person roles. In fact, there has recently been a silent wave of workers who work in something called “shadow roles,” where the person takes on more than one full-time position when one of them is remote in order to make a double income. The ethics and legality of doing something like this is questionable and likely scarce, but nonetheless prevalent.

Another way members of Congress are trying to address the problem of the Great Resignation is through the possible implementation of a 4 day workweek. This is not a new concept; in fact, there are many companies across the United States who are already working under a 4-day workweek, some with less than 40 hours per week, and some with expectations of 10 hours per day. Patrick Thomas, writer at the Wall Street Journal, explored this concept in 2021 when it became clear that the new trend among workplaces was to try to combat burnout through one less day in the week. He described many instances in which this theory seemed to work, but also how they did not.<sup>123</sup> For the most part though, both the workweek and the ideas that have come from the labor shortage from COVID-19 are very relevant to this subject because they show two things: that people are searching for a solution to the problem of trying to balance work and life, and

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<sup>123</sup> “The concept of working fewer days or hours surfaced again from time to time—Richard Nixon as vice president predicted the adoption of a four-day workweek—but it never achieved mainstream acceptance. Even [Kellogg Co.](#), which gained attention for instituting six-hour shifts at a cereal plant in 1930—ended the shortened schedule for most departments following World War II, according to the company. Kellogg reinstated eight-hour shifts for all departments in the mid 1980s, the company said”

that specifically working mothers will be impacted in the workplace based on shifting cultures.

Based on the research on work/life balance, as well as the feminist movement ranging from the First to the Fourth Wave, I have found that women have been struggling towards a kind of life satisfaction that work/life balance promises. But, in a way, have overcorrected. The workplace is not perfect. There are still many instances of outright sexism, a lack of a supportive culture, and pressure on working mothers. However, I believe that with an overall shift in mindset, as well as a continuous fight towards things like paid parental leave, a four-day workweek, and the reliance on individual communities, women can be able to take the next steps towards the goal of happiness they cannot reach through a balance of work and life.

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