



4 Generations of American Women

Great Progress, Persistent Challenges

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“No one who has been engaged in feminist politics and thought for any length of time can be oblivious to an abiding aspect of the modern women’s movement in America—that so often, and despite its many victories, it seems to falter along a ‘mother-daughter’ divide. ... The contemporary women’s movement seems fated to fight a war on two fronts: alongside the battle of the sexes rages the battle of the ages.”

– Susan Faludi, “American Electra,” *Harpers Magazine*, October 2010¹

There are many who would agree with Faludi’s observation that there is a vast generational divide in the women’s movement, characterized by discord bordering on rancor. It is a gap further exacerbated by the diversity of women and their lived experiences.

The past few years have been a particularly heady time for discussion of women’s advancement—or lack thereof—in American society. That discussion also has given rise to an important parallel conversation about who American women are, who speaks in their name, and whose perspectives and experiences dominate their storyline. The need to confront such issues of voice and identity has been especially glaring in talk and writing about women’s leadership, which tend to focus on individual women and their private pathways to power and leave less empowered women out in the cold. That’s a real shame.

To meaningfully promote women’s leadership—that is to say, the ability of all women to achieve maximum political, economic, and personal empowerment—the social structures, political roadblocks, and policies that hold women back have to change. Structural change requires collective action. But women cannot come together for a cause that does not feel inclusive.

The Center for American Progress has already begun a body of work that seeks to expand the literature of women’s leadership in terms of race and class.⁵ This issue brief will now take up the question of how age—via generational differences in attitudes, expectations, and life experiences—can play a role in complicating the women’s leadership conversation.

From different starting points come common frustrations

Generational researchers usually divide different groups of living Americans into cohorts that share key attitudes and orientations and that had common historical experiences in their formative years. The recent American generations break along these lines: the Silent Generation, those born between 1928 and 1945; the Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1980; and Millennials, those born starting in 1981.⁶

A note on generations

The span of years that provide definition to distinct generational groupings are, of course, made-up constructs, and demographers, political scientists, and marketers may delineate them in different ways. In the interest of consistency with most published sources, this brief follows the definitions used by the Pew Research Center. It is worth noting that there is some disagreement among generational chroniclers as to whether the Millennial generation has an endpoint and if so, when; there also is some disagreement on whether the point of delineation between the Baby Boomers and Generation X should be 1961 or 1965.

The women of Generation X and Millennial women inherited a very different world than those of the Silent Generation and the Baby Boomers, who were born in an era in which many unmarried women could not access contraception, abortion was illegal, and married women had to ask their husbands' for permission to take a job. The landscape of possibility for women began to change dramatically in the latter decades of the 20th century as women made enormous gains in educational achievement and professional advancement, narrowing the gender gap in pay and making real inroads into many professions that traditionally had been closed to them.

Yet despite their very different beginnings, all these generations of women now face a similarly sobering reality:

- Women's progress in attaining leadership roles both in government and the private sector has essentially stalled.⁷
- Women still earn, on average, only 78 cents for every \$1 men earn⁸—a gap that is even more dramatic between women of color and white men.⁹
- Occupational segregation still persists, with women disproportionately represented in traditionally female fields such as education and health services¹⁰—and not in leadership positions.¹¹ They also are disproportionately employed in the low-wage workforce.¹²

"We grew up with mothers and mentors who accepted burnout and exhaustion as inevitable, and who perpetuated the dangerous myth that women are superheroes. ... This is something that today's young women refuse to embrace."

— Simone N. Sneed, "What millennial women want now," CNN, March 25, 2014²

- Women continue to be employed in inflexible workplaces that are still structured as they were four decades ago, with little acknowledgment of the fact that only 20 percent of children in the United States today live in married homes where the father works and the mother stays home. In the 1970s, more than twice as many children lived in such households.¹³

Facing this common reality, it's not surprising that the generations poll quite similarly when asked about the challenges facing women and the need to take action:

- All these cohorts of women believe, in striking numbers—77 percent of Baby Boomer women, 68 percent of Generation X women, and 75 percent of Millennial women—that our country needs to continue to make changes to “bring about equality in the workplace,” according to a 2013 Pew Research Center poll.¹⁴
- All these women are considerably more likely than their male contemporaries to believe that gender plays a role in holding women back. Another 2015 Pew Research poll found double-digit gender gaps between men and women of each generational group on the question of whether women in the United States today face at least some discrimination. Likewise, there were double-digit gender gaps in each age group on the question of whether it is easier for men to get top executive positions in business or to get elected to high political office,¹⁵ with women saying that it was easier in both cases.
- Women of all age groups very notably come together to support legislation to address the issue of equal pay¹⁶—perhaps because pay inequity is a phenomenon that continues throughout the life span, from first jobs through eventual Social Security payments.¹⁷

Many women of different age groups also share a common feeling of disappointment over the disconnect between their hopes for gender equality and the realities of their lives:

- A 2014 survey of male and female graduates of Harvard Business School found that while only 25 percent of Generation X and 17 percent of Baby Boomer female graduates thought that their male partners' careers would take precedence over their own, approximately 40 percent of these women ended up with lives that played out in that way.¹⁸
- New York University sociologist Kathleen Gerson found a similar pattern when she interviewed a more diverse sample of Millennials for her 2010 book, *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America*. According to Gerson, overwhelming majorities of both men and women ages 18 to 32 felt deeply that combining work and family was central to their identity and to their definition of success. When confronted with the stresses of work-family conflict, however, she observed that Millennial men fell back on very traditional expectations of gender roles, while women continued to hope for a more equal future.¹⁹

“Young women didn't invent intersectionality, and it really annoys me when they wave it around like some kind of slice-and-dice Ginsu knife whenever an older feminist tries to talk about *women*. And yet, a lot of what irks me about young feminists irked me about older feminists too.”

– Katha Pollitt, “Feminist Mothers, Flapper Daughters?,” *The Nation*, September 30, 2010³

“[W]omen of color and younger feminists have often taken white second-wave feminists to task ... But their work is often made invisible by an older generation of feminists who prefer to believe young women are apathetic rather than admitting their movement is shifting into something they don't recognize and can't control.”

– Jessica Valenti, “Who Stole Feminism?,” *The Nation*, September 29, 2010⁴

Given the basic similarity of belief among various cohorts of women and the fact that they all face similar challenges in navigating the workforce—what author Peggy Orenstein has called the “half-changed world”²⁰ of early 21st century America—it would be easy enough to dismiss the sense of generational malaise and even estrangement expressed by many self-identified feminist commentators and activists as just the latest incarnation of the drama that journalist Susan Faludi has labeled feminism’s recurrent “mother-daughter divide.” Yet the fault lines of discord really should not be dismissed nor smoothed over so quickly and offhandedly.

There are deep reasons underlying a pervasive feeling of division among different generations of women. Growing up, coming of age, and navigating the world of work and family at different points in recent American history have had a number of very real effects.

Increased diversity among the rising generation of women means that now more than ever, a single story of women’s progress is not enough

The alienation of women of color, and African American women in particular, from the mainstream women’s movement is not new. It is incontestable that the narrative that defines women’s progress in America has long been one uniquely focused on white women’s experience. That narrowness has meant that glaring blind spots have long existed in how stories of women’s work, relationships, community activities, and ability to control their reproductive destinies have been told in this country. Notably, the themes of personal and professional choice that run through so much of the women’s leadership discussion have little to do with the workplace experiences of many women of color, who have traditionally worked outside their homes to support their families and have largely remained in traditionally female sectors with low pay and few opportunities for advancement. To make the point: 42.7 percent of the white female labor force is in managerial and professional occupations, while only 33.5 percent of African American women and 25.6 percent of Latinas hold such jobs.²³

In an increasingly diverse United States, such a blinkered adherence to a storyline that leaves out the lives of such a great number of women is not just offensive; for a movement, it also is a recipe for irrelevance. Millennials are the most diverse American generation in history: In 2014, only 57 percent of those ages 18 to 33 were non-Hispanic whites, down from 84 percent when members of the Silent Generation were the same age.²⁴ Young women of color have made it clear that they do not feel their voices are fully represented in today’s discussions of women’s issues and that calls for an abstract sort of universal solidarity feel less inclusive than silencing.

Women’s leaders must represent and be able to articulate the varied and nuanced realities of women’s lives in 21st century America.

“There is not only the question of color; there is the question of the color of experience.”

– Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 1971²¹

“Black feminists ... are expected to compartmentalize their blackness and put it away—while fighting on behalf of their womanhood. That ridiculous (and ironically misogynistic) expectation from their white feminist counterparts amounts to what feels like friendly fire; you’re basically being discriminated against by the very person standing next to you in the fight for equality.”

– Blue Telusma, “Dear Patricia Arquette: Blacks and gays owe white women nothing,” *theGrio*, February 23, 2015²²

Talk of ‘leaning in’ for rising generations of female leaders cannot ignore the larger widespread structural issues of simply earning a living

Women of the Silent Generation and female Baby Boomers lived through an explosion of possibility for women. They also, for the most part, came of age in an extended period of postwar American economic growth and opportunity. Tail-end Boomer, Generation X, and Millennial women, on the other hand, moved into adulthood at times of much greater economic difficulty, far more constricted job choices, considerably higher basic living expenses for families, and an ambient sense of anxiety about the future. Some Baby Boomers also entered the labor market during a recession—1981 to 1982—but the economy recovered more quickly than it has in more recent recessions.²⁶

Moreover, Generation X was the first generation of college graduates to earn less than its immediate predecessors, and by the end of the 1990s, it had been labeled as potentially the first generation whose lifetime earnings would add up to be less than those of their parents.²⁷ Generation X’s woes have continued in recent years. Saddled with credit card and student-loan debt, they went on to lose nearly half their collective wealth between 2007 and 2010.²⁸ Many Millennials came of age during the Great Recession and launched their careers at a time of enormous job scarcity.²⁹ Even more heavily burdened with student-loan debt than were members of Generation X at the same age,³⁰ they also are on track to be less well off than their parents.³¹

The vast levels of income and wealth inequality³² that came into being during the Millennials’ growing-up years have created enormous experiential gaps between well-off and poor women. For instance, women of higher socioeconomic backgrounds marry and bear children later, while women of lower socioeconomic backgrounds have children early and are increasingly supporting those children as single mothers.³³ What all this means is that women’s abilities to access the kind of education and professional experiences that could put them on a track toward leadership are extremely uneven and may, arguably, be more grossly divergent than ever before.

It has been frequently noted that the notion of “leaning in” advanced by Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg is not realistic for women who lack the financial cushion that would permit them to walk away from their jobs—or weather the blow of being fired—if they were unsuccessful in their bids for more money or advancement. In truth, that scenario is unrealistic for most women today, who increasingly find themselves fighting to stay afloat amid flat wages and a rising cost of living.³⁴

“White women’s feminisms still center around *equality* ... Black women’s feminisms demand *justice*. There is a difference. One kind of feminism focuses on the policies that will help women integrate fully into the existing American system. The other recognizes the fundamental flaws in the system and seeks its complete and total transformation.”

– Brittney Cooper, “Feminism’s ugly internal clash: Why its future is not up to white women,” *Salon*, September 24, 2014²⁵

Pervasive work-family conflict is so enduring that many young women appear to see family and career as all but mutually exclusive

In the 1970s and 1980s, the so-called Supermom—a working mother who has and does it all—was popularly represented as the epitome of women’s liberation.³⁵ Successive decades of struggle in a world of work that has arguably grown less family friendly in recent decades due to increasingly demanding work hours for professionals³⁶ and unpredictable, unstable work for low-wage workers,³⁷ have left younger women with a far more complicated attitude toward working motherhood.

Generation X has long been known as being less centered on work and more concerned with quality-of-life issues than its Baby Boomer elders—an orientation that, early on, earned Generation Xers a reputation first as slackers³⁸ and later as want-it-all whiners³⁹—both ultimately undeserved labels. Millennial women, however, appear to have taken this wariness of work to a higher level, in some unique and curious ways.

The power of internalized work devotion

Sociologist Pamela Stone has found a particularly striking fealty to the culture of long hours and single-minded career dedication among younger Baby Boomers and older members of Generation X. That loyalty, she and co-author Lisa Ackerly Hernandez noted with some surprise in a 2013 *Journal of Social Issues* article, strongly endured even among women who were essentially pushed out of their workplaces due to the stigma they experienced from making use of flexible work arrangements to care for their families. These women, they wrote, “react and behave as victims of stigmatizing treatment, but do not consider themselves the victims of prejudice or bias. In fact, they accept the legitimacy of professional time norms, and tend to view their treatment as fair and justifiable.”⁴⁰

Of all the generations now active in American society, Millennials are the least likely to have grown up in households with a working father and a stay-at-home mother.⁴¹ They are the group most likely to have had mothers who earned as much as or more than fathers, and—in a 2014 survey of more than 2,100 men and women ages 18 to 64 conducted by *Working Mother* magazine—were the age group most likely to say that a working mother sets a positive example for her children.⁴² And yet according to this same survey, Millennials were also the group most likely to agree with the idea that one parent should be home to care for children.⁴³ They were the group most likely to say that they were proud of their mothers for working and also to say that they wished their mothers had stayed home with them.

More than any other generation of American women, Millennials know what it's like to have working mothers without social policies to ease work-life integration. As the most technology-savvy and technology-acculturated cohort, they also know the downsides of a device-tethered life. Perhaps for this reason, although they reported working the same hours per day as women of other generations, the Millennials in the *Working Mother* poll also were more likely to report feeling that they “cannot get away from work.” They also reported that workplace flexibility—where workers are nonetheless tied to emails and cellphones—causes work to interfere with family time, an opinion that only one-quarter of Baby Boomers shared.⁴⁴

Millennial women's worries about work-life integration are such that, for many, it appears that family and career seem all but incompatible. In 2013, a Pew Research Center poll found that Millennial working mothers were more likely than working mothers overall to say that being a parent makes it harder to advance in their career.⁴⁵ In another Pew poll conducted in late 2014 that looked at attitudes toward women's leadership, Millennial women were more likely than those of older generations to say that ambitious women should put off having children for the sake of their career.⁴⁶

What all these attitudes make clear is that encouraging young women to step up and lean in cannot be done without talking about the culture of work and the structural barriers to women's full participation in the workforce, as well as ways that work-family policy could radically alter their future.

Increased convergence between younger men and women has led to decreased interest and belief in the so-called unique capabilities of women leaders

Men's and women's lives in previous generations were markedly different. In recent decades, however, their lived experiences—in work, at home, and even in rates of military service⁴⁷—have greatly converged. Surveys have found that as their lives have become more similar, men and women also have become much more alike in their aspirations and values regarding work, ambition, and success.⁴⁸

Perhaps as a result of this overall gender convergence, Millennial women are far less likely than older women to believe in essential differences between men and women and, by extension, seem far less likely to be swayed by the kind of essentialist thinking that underlies much of the rhetoric of women's leadership. Recent Pew polling showed that agreement with the idea that women in high political offices are better than men at working out compromises decreased with age among women respondents; half of women from the Silent Generation, less than half of Baby Boomer women, 37 percent of Generation X women, and 33 percent of Millennial women agreed. Similarly, 39 percent of Baby Boomer women and 35 percent of Silent Generation women said they believed that

female leaders are “better than their male counterparts at working to improve the quality of life for Americans,” while only 24 percent of Generation X women and 22 percent of Millennial women agreed.⁴⁹ The generation gap holds up for views of women in business leadership as well. Pew found that fully 40 percent of Baby Boomer women stood by the belief that female business leaders were more honest and ethical than male leaders, while only 31 percent of both Millennial and Generation X women shared that sentiment.⁵⁰

Looking forward

Today’s female leaders—by and large, Baby Boomers and older Generation Xers—are followed by a generation of women with a great deal of potential as agents of change. Millennials—both men and women—tend to support a more activist government than the generations before them⁵¹ and appear to have high expectations regarding their own abilities to demand and achieve better lives. In one fascinating 2013 Pew survey finding, Millennial women proved to be almost equally as likely as female Generation Xers and Baby Boomer women to have asked for a better job or higher salary, despite their younger age and fewer years of work experience.⁵²

To harness the energies of this rising generation, current leaders must fully address younger women’s concerns about inclusion and economic opportunity. To make the promise of women’s leadership real for the greatest number of women of all ages and backgrounds, women’s advocates must ground their work in the day-to-day reality and diversity of the female experience.

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- 36 See, for example, Youngjoo Cha and Kim Weeden, "Overwork and the Slow Convergence in the Gender Gap in Wages," *American Sociological Review* 79 (3) (2014): 1–28.
- 37 Stephanie Luce, Sasha Hammad and Darrah Sipe, "Short Shifted" (New York: Retail Action Project, 2014), available at <http://retailactionproject.org/2014/09/short-shifted/>.
- 38 Nicholas J. Beutell and Ursula Wittig-Berman, "Work-family conflict and work-family synergy for generation X, baby boomers, and matures," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23 (5) (2008): 507–523.
- 39 See, for example, Marjorie Williams, "A Working Mom's Comedy," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2002, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A30195-2002Oct1.html>.
- 40 Pamela Stone and Lisa Ackerly Hernandez, "The All-or-Nothing Workplace: Flexibility Stigma and 'Opting Out' Among Professional-Managerial Women," *Journal of Social Issues* 69 (2) (2013): 235–256.
- 41 Working Mother Research Institute, "Mothers and Daughters (and fathers and sons): The Working Mother Generations Report" (2014), available at http://www.wmmsurveys.com/Generations_Report.pdf.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Pew Research Center, "On Pay Gap, Millennial Women Near Parity—For Now," p. 58.
- 46 Pew Research Center, "Women and Leadership: Public Says Women are Equally Qualified, but Barriers Persist."
- 47 In 2012, a Gallup poll revealed that 61 percent of men and 2 percent of women ages 75 to 79 were military veterans, compared with 7 percent of 18- to 24-year-old men and 2 percent of 18- to 24-year-old women; and 12 percent and 3 percent of 25- to 34-year-old men and women, respectively. See Frank Newport, "In U.S., 24% of Men, 2% of Women Are Veterans," Gallup, November 12, 2012, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/158729/men-women-veterans.aspx>.
- 48 Millennial men and women, for example, stand out from previous generations in giving a similar level of relative importance to both high earnings and the potential for work-family balance in judging the desirability of a work situation. See Council of Economic Advisers, *15 Economic Facts About Millennials*. The majority of Millennial men and women also now agree that there is no difference between men and women's ambition. See Pew Research Center, "On Pay Gap, Millennial Women Near Parity—For Now."
- 49 Pew Research Center, "Women and Leadership: Public Says Women are Equally Qualified, but Barriers Persist."
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Paul Taylor and others, "Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends" (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2014), available at http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf.
- 52 Pew Research Center, "On Pay Gap, Millennial Women Near Parity—For Now."