

October 30, 2005

What's a Modern Girl to Do?

By [MAUREEN DOWD](#)

When I entered college in 1969, women were bursting out of their 50's chrysalis, shedding girdles, padded bras and conventions. The Jazz Age spirit flared in the Age of Aquarius. Women were once again imitating men and acting all independent: smoking, drinking, wanting to earn money and thinking they had the right to be sexual, this time protected by the pill. I didn't fit in with the brazen new world of hard-charging feminists. I was more of a fun-loving (if chaste) type who would decades later come to life in Sarah Jessica Parker's Carrie Bradshaw. I hated the grubby, unisex jeans and no-makeup look and drugs that zoned you out, and I couldn't understand the appeal of dances that didn't involve touching your partner. In the universe of Eros, I longed for style and wit. I loved the Art Deco glamour of 30's movies. I wanted to dance the Continental like Fred and Ginger in white hotel suites; drink martinis like Myrna Loy and William Powell; live the life of a screwball heroine like Katharine Hepburn, wearing a gold lamÈ gown cut on the bias, cavorting with Cary Grant, strolling along Fifth Avenue with my pet leopard.

My mom would just shake her head and tell me that my idea of the 30's was wildly romanticized. "We were poor," she'd say. "We didn't dance around in white hotel suites." I took the idealism and passion of the 60's for granted, simply assuming we were sailing toward perfect equality with men, a utopian world at home and at work. I didn't listen to her when she cautioned me about the chimera of equality.

On my 31st birthday, she sent me a bankbook with a modest nest egg she had saved for me. "I always felt that the girls in a family should get a little more than the boys even though all are equally loved," she wrote in a letter. "They need a little cushion to fall back on. Women can stand on the Empire State Building and scream to the heavens that they are equal to men and liberated, but until they have the same anatomy, it's a lie. It's more of a man's world today than ever. Men can eat their cake in unlimited bakeries."

I thought she was just being Old World, like my favorite jade, Dorothy Parker, when she wrote:

*By the time you swear you're his,
Shivering and sighing,
And he vows his passion is
Infinite, undying -
Lady, make a note of this:
One of you is lying.*

I thought the struggle for egalitarianism was a cinch, so I could leave it to my earnest sisters in black turtlenecks and Birkenstocks. I figured there was plenty of time for me to get serious later, that America would always be full of passionate and full-throated debate about the big stuff - social issues, sexual equality, civil rights. Little did I realize that the feminist revolution would have the unexpected consequence of intensifying the confusion between the sexes, leaving women in a tangle of dependence and independence as they entered the 21st century.

Maybe we should have known that the story of women's progress would be more of a zigzag than a superhighway, that the triumph of feminism would last a nanosecond while the backlash lasted 40 years.

Despite the best efforts of philosophers, politicians, historians, novelists, screenwriters, linguists, therapists, anthropologists and facilitators, men and women are still in a muddle in the boardroom, the bedroom and the Situation Room.

Courtship

My mom gave me three essential books on the subject of men. The first, when I was 13, was "On Becoming a Woman." The second, when I was 21, was "365 Ways to Cook Hamburger." The third, when I was 25, was "How to Catch and Hold a Man," by Yvonne Antelle. ("Keep thinking of yourself as a soft, mysterious cat. . . Men are fascinated by bright, shiny objects, by lots of curls, lots of hair on the head . . . by bows, ribbons, ruffles and bright colors. . . Sarcasm is dangerous. Avoid it altogether.")

Because I received "How to Catch and Hold a Man" at a time when we were entering the Age of Equality, I put it aside as an anachronism. After all, sometime in the 1960's flirting went out of fashion, as did ironing boards, makeup and the idea that men needed to be "trapped" or "landed." The way to approach men, we reasoned, was forthrightly and without games, artifice or frills. Unfortunately, history has shown this to be a misguided notion.

I knew it even before the 1995 publication of "The Rules," a dating bible that encouraged women to return to prefeminist mind games by playing hard to get. ("Don't stay on the phone for more than 10 minutes. . . Even if you are the head of your own company. . . when you're with a man you like, be quiet and mysterious, act ladylike, cross your legs and smile. . . Wear black sheer pantyhose and hike up your skirt to entice the opposite sex!")

I knew this before fashion magazines became crowded with crinolines, bows, ruffles, leopard-skin scarves, 50's party dresses and other sartorial equivalents of flirting and with articles like "The Return of Hard to Get." ("I think it behooves us to stop offering each other these pearls of feminism, to stop saying, 'So, why don't you call him?'" a writer lectured in Mademoiselle. "Some men must have the thrill of the chase.")

I knew things were changing because a succession of my single girlfriends had called, sounding sheepish, to ask if they could borrow my out-of-print copy of "How to Catch and Hold a Man."

Decades after the feminist movement promised equality with men, it was becoming increasingly apparent that many women would have to brush up on the venerable tricks of the trade: an absurdly charming little laugh, a pert toss of the head, an air of saucy triumph, dewy eyes and a full knowledge of music, drawing, elegant note writing and geography. It would once more be considered captivating to lie on a chaise longue, pass a lacy handkerchief across the eyelids and complain of a case of springtime giddiness.

Today, women have gone back to hunting their quarry - in person and in cyberspace - with elaborate schemes designed to allow the deluded creatures to think they are the hunters. "Men like hunting, and we shouldn't deprive them of their chance to do their hunting and mating rituals," my 26-year-old friend Julie Bosman, a New York Times reporter, says. "As my mom says, Men don't like to be chased." Or as the Marvelettes sang, "The hunter gets captured by the game."

These days the key to staying cool in the courtship rituals is B. & I., girls say - Busy and Important. "As much as you're waiting for that little envelope to appear on your screen," says Carrie Foster, a 29-year-old publicist in Washington, "you happen to have a lot of stuff to do anyway." If a guy rejects you or turns out to be the essence of evil, you can ratchet up from B. & I. to C.B.B., Can't Be Bothered. In the T.M.I. - Too Much Information - digital age, there can be infinite technological foreplay.

Helen Fisher, a Rutgers anthropologist, concurs with Julie: "What our grandmothers told us about playing hard to get is true. The whole point of the game is to impress and capture. It's not about honesty. Many men and women, when they're playing the courtship game, deceive so they can win. Novelty, excitement and danger drive up dopamine in the brain. And both sexes brag."

Women might dye their hair, apply makeup and spend hours finding a hip-slimming dress, she said, while men may drive a nice car or wear a fancy suit that makes them seem richer than they are. In this retro world, a woman must play hard to get but stay soft as a kitten. And avoid sarcasm. Altogether.

Money

In those faraway, long-ago days of feminism, there was talk about equal pay for equal work. Now there's talk about "girl money."

A friend of mine in her 30's says it is a term she hears bandied about the New York dating scene. She also notes a shift in the type of gifts given at wedding showers around town, a reversion to 50's-style offerings: soup ladles and those frilly little aprons from Anthropologie and vintage stores are being unwrapped along with see-through nighties and push-up bras.

"What I find most disturbing about the 1950's-ification and retrogression of women's lives is that it has seeped into the corporate and social culture, where it can do real damage," she complains. "Otherwise intelligent men, who know women still earn less than men as a rule, say things like: 'I'll get the check. You only have girl money.'"

Throughout the long, dark ages of undisputed patriarchy, women connived to trade beauty and sex for affluence and status. In the first flush of feminism, women offered to pay half the check with "woman money" as a way to show that these crass calculations - that a woman's worth in society was determined by her looks, that she was an ornament up for sale to the highest bidder - no longer applied.

Now dating etiquette has reverted. Young women no longer care about using the check to assert their equality. They care about using it to assess their sexuality. Going Dutch is an archaic feminist relic. Young women talk about it with disbelief and disdain. "It's a scuzzy 70's thing, like platform shoes on men," one told me.

"Feminists in the 70's went overboard," Anne Schroeder, a 26-year-old magazine editor in Washington, agrees. "Paying is like opening a car door. It's nice. I appreciate it. But he doesn't have to."

Unless he wants another date.

Women in their 20's think old-school feminists looked for equality in all the wrong places, that instead of fighting battles about whether women should pay for dinner or wear padded bras they should have focused only on big economic issues.

After Googling and Bikramming to get ready for a first dinner date, a modern girl will end the evening with the Offering, an insincere bid to help pay the check. "They make like they are heading into their bag after a meal, but it is a dodge," Marc Santora, a 30-year-old Metro reporter for The Times, says. "They know you will stop them before a credit card can be drawn. If you don't, they hold it against you."

One of my girlfriends, a TV producer in New York, told me much the same thing: "If you offer, and they accept, then it's over."

Jurassic feminists shudder at the retro implication of a quid profiterole. But it doesn't matter if the woman is making as much money as the man, or more, she expects him to pay, both to prove her desirability and as a way of signaling romance - something that's more confusing in a dating culture rife with casual hookups and group activities. (Once beyond the initial testing phase and settled in a relationship, of course, she can pony up more.)

"There are plenty of ways for me to find out if he's going to see me as an equal without disturbing the dating ritual," one young woman says. "Disturbing the dating ritual leads to chaos. Everybody knows that."

When I asked a young man at my gym how he and his lawyer girlfriend were going to divide the costs on a [California](#) vacation, he looked askance. "She never offers," he replied. "And I like paying for her." It is, as one guy said, "one of the few remaining ways we can demonstrate our manhood."

Power Dynamics

At a party for the Broadway opening of "Sweet Smell of Success," a top New York producer gave me a lecture on the price of female success that was anything but sweet. He confessed that he had wanted to ask me out on a date when he was between marriages but nixed the idea because my job as a Times columnist made me too intimidating. Men, he explained, prefer women who seem malleable and awed. He predicted that I would never find a mate because if there's one thing men fear, it's a woman who uses her critical faculties. Will she be critical of absolutely everything, even his manhood?

He had hit on a primal fear of single successful women: that the aroma of male power is an aphrodisiac for women, but the perfume of female power is a turnoff for men. It took women a few decades to realize that everything they were doing to advance themselves in the boardroom could be sabotaging their chances in the bedroom, that evolution was lagging behind equality.

A few years ago at a White House correspondents' dinner, I met a very beautiful and successful actress. Within minutes, she blurted out: "I can't believe I'm 46 and not married. Men only want to marry their personal assistants or P.R. women."

I'd been noticing a trend along these lines, as famous and powerful men took up with young women whose job it was to care for them and nurture them in some way: their secretaries, assistants, nannies, caterers, flight attendants, researchers and fact-checkers.

John Schwartz of The New York Times made the trend official in 2004 when he reported: "Men would rather marry their secretaries than their bosses, and evolution may be to blame." A study by psychology researchers at the University of Michigan, using college undergraduates, suggested that men going for long-term relationships would rather marry women in subordinate jobs than women who are supervisors. Men think that women with important jobs are more likely to cheat on them. There it is, right in the DNA: women get penalized by insecure men for being too independent.

"The hypothesis," Dr. Stephanie Brown, the lead author of the study, theorized, "is that there are evolutionary pressures on males to take steps to minimize the risk of raising offspring that are not their own." Women, by contrast, did not show a marked difference between their attraction to men who might work above them and their attraction to men who might work below them.

So was the feminist movement some sort of cruel hoax? Do women get less desirable as they get more successful?

After I first wrote on this subject, a Times reader named Ray Lewis e-mailed me. While we had assumed that making ourselves more professionally accomplished would make us more fascinating, it turned out, as Lewis put it, that smart women were "draining at times."

Or as Bill Maher more crudely but usefully summed it up to Craig Ferguson on the "Late Late Show" on CBS: "Women get in relationships because they want somebody to talk to. Men want women to shut up."

Women moving up still strive to marry up. Men moving up still tend to marry down. The two sexes' going in opposite directions has led to an epidemic of professional women missing out on husbands and kids.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist and the author of "Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children," a book published in 2002, conducted a survey and found that 55 percent of 35-year-old career women were childless. And among corporate executives who earn \$100,000 or more, she said, 49 percent of the women did not have children, compared with only 19 percent of the men.

Hewlett quantified, yet again, that men have an unfair advantage. "Nowadays," she said, "the rule of thumb seems to be that the more successful the woman, the less likely it is she will find a husband or bear a child. For men, the reverse is true."

A 2005 report by researchers at four British universities indicated that a high I.Q. hampers a woman's chance to marry, while it is a plus for men. The prospect for marriage increased by 35 percent for guys for each 16-point increase in I.Q.; for women, there is a 40 percent drop for each 16-point rise.

On a "60 Minutes" report on the Hewlett book, Lesley Stahl talked to two young women who went to Harvard Business School. They agreed that while they were the perfect age to start families, they didn't find it easy to meet the right mates.

Men, apparently, learn early to protect their eggshell egos from high-achieving women. The girls said they hid the fact that they went to Harvard from guys they met because it was the kiss of death. "The H-bomb," they dubbed it. "As soon as you say Harvard Business School . . . that's the end of the conversation," Ani Vartanian said. "As soon as the guys say, 'Oh, I go to Harvard Business School,' all the girls start falling into them."

Hewlett thinks that the 2005 American workplace is more macho than ever. "It's actually much more difficult now than 10 years ago to have a career and raise a family," she told me. "The trend lines continue that highly educated women in many countries are increasingly dealing with this creeping nonchoice and end up on this path of delaying finding a mate and delaying childbearing. Whether you're looking at [Italy](#), [Russia](#) or the U.S., all of that is true." Many women continue to fear that the more they accomplish, the more they may have to sacrifice. They worry that men still veer away from "challenging" women because of a male atavistic desire to be the superior force in a relationship.

"With men and women, it's always all about control issues, isn't it?" says a guy I know, talking about his bitter divorce.

Or, as Craig Bierko, a musical comedy star and actor who played one of Carrie's boyfriends on "Sex and the City," told me, "Deep down, beneath the bluster and machismo, men are simply afraid to say that what they're truly looking for in a woman is an intelligent, confident and dependable partner in life whom they can devote themselves to unconditionally until she's 40."

Ms. Versus Mrs.

"Ms." was supposed to neutralize the stature of women, so they weren't publicly defined by their marital status. When The Times finally agreed to switch to Ms. in its news pages in 1986, after much hectoring by feminists, Gloria Steinem sent flowers to the executive editor, Abe Rosenthal. But nowadays most young brides want to take their husbands' names and brag on the moniker Mrs., a brand that proclaims you belong to him. T-shirts with "MRS." emblazoned in sequins or sparkly beads are popular wedding-shower gifts.

A Harvard economics professor, Claudia Goldin, did a study last year that found that 44 percent of women in the Harvard class of 1980 who married within 10 years of graduation kept their birth names, while in the class of '90 it was down to 32 percent. In 1990, 23 percent of college-educated women kept their own names after marriage, while a decade later the number had fallen to 17 percent.

Time magazine reported that an informal poll in the spring of 2005 by the Knot, a wedding Web site, showed similar results: 81 percent of respondents took their spouse's last name, an increase from 71 percent in 2000. The number of women with hyphenated surnames fell from 21 percent to 8 percent.

"It's a return to romance, a desire to make marriage work," Goldin told one interviewer, adding that young women might feel that by keeping their own names they were aligning themselves with tedious old-fashioned feminists, and this might be a turnoff to them.

The professor, who married in 1979 and kept her name, undertook the study after her niece, a lawyer, changed hers. "She felt that her generation of women didn't have to do the same things mine did, because of what we had already achieved," Goldin told Time.

Many women now do not think of domestic life as a "comfortable concentration camp," as Betty Friedan wrote in "The Feminine Mystique," where they are losing their identities and turning into "anonymous biological robots in a docile mass." Now they want to be Mrs. Anonymous Biological Robot in a Docile Mass. They dream of being rescued - to flirt, to shop, to stay home and be taken care of. They shop for "Stepford Fashions" - matching shoes and ladylike bags and the 50's-style satin, lace and chiffon party dresses featured in InStyle layouts - and spend their days at the gym trying for Wisteria Lane waistlines.

The Times recently ran a front-page article about young women attending Ivy League colleges, women who are being groomed to take their places in the professional and political elite, who are planning to reject careers in favor of playing traditional roles, staying home and raising children.

"My mother always told me you can't be the best career woman and the best mother at the same time," the brainy, accomplished Cynthia Liu told Louise Story, explaining why she hoped to be a stay-at-home mom a few years after she goes to law school. "You always have to choose one over the other."

Kate White, the editor of *Cosmopolitan*, told me that she sees a distinct shift in what her readers want these days. "Women now don't want to be in the grind," she said. "The baby boomers made the grind seem unappealing."

Cynthia Russett, a professor of American history at Yale, told Story that women today are simply more "realistic," having seen the dashed utopia of those who assumed it wouldn't be so hard to combine full-time work and child rearing.

To the extent that young women are rejecting the old idea of copying men and reshaping the world around their desires, it's exhilarating progress. But to the extent that a pampered class of females is walking away from the problem and just planning to marry rich enough to cosset themselves in a narrow world of dependence on men, it's an irritating setback. If the new ethos is "a woman needs a career like a fish needs a bicycle," it won't be healthy.

Movies

In all those Tracy-Hepburn movies more than a half-century ago, it was the snap and crackle of a romance between equals that was so exciting. You still see it onscreen occasionally - the incendiary chemistry of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie playing married assassins aiming for mutually assured orgasms and destruction in "Mr. and Mrs. Smith." Interestingly, that movie was described as retro because of its salty battle of wits between two peppery lovers. Moviemakers these days are more interested in exploring what Steve Martin, in his novel "Shopgirl," calls the "calm cushion" of romances between unequals.

In James Brooks's movie "Spanglish," Adam Sandler, playing a sensitive Los Angeles chef, falls for his hot Mexican maid, just as in "Maid in Manhattan," Ralph Fiennes, playing a sensitive New York pol, falls for the hot Latino maid at his hotel, played by Jennifer Lopez. Sandler's maid, who cleans up for him without being able to speak English, is presented as the ideal woman, in looks and character. His wife, played by TÈa Leoni, is repellent: a jangly, yakking, overachieving, overexercised, unfaithful, shallow she-monster who has just lost her job with a commercial design firm and fears she has lost her identity.

In 2003, we had "Girl With a Pearl Earring," in which Colin Firth's Vermeer erotically paints Scarlett Johansson's Dutch maid, and Richard Curtis's "Love Actually," about the

attraction of unequals. The witty and sophisticated British prime minister, played by Hugh Grant, falls for the chubby girl who wheels the tea and scones into his office. A businessman married to the substantial Emma Thompson, the sister of the prime minister, falls for his sultry secretary. A novelist played by Colin Firth falls for his maid, who speaks only Portuguese.

Art is imitating life, turning women who seek equality into selfish narcissists and objects of rejection rather than of affection.

It's funny. I come from a family of Irish domestics - statuesque, 6-foot-tall women who cooked, kept house and acted as nannies for some of America's first families. I was always so proud of achieving more - succeeding in a high-powered career that would have been closed to my great-aunts. How odd, then, to find out now that being a maid would have enhanced my chances with men.

An upstairs maid, of course.

Women's Magazines

Cosmo is still the best-selling magazine on college campuses, as it was when I was in college, and the best-selling monthly magazine on the newsstand. The June 2005 issue, with Jessica Simpson on the cover, her cleavage spilling out of an orange crocheted halter dress, could have been June 1970. The headlines are familiar: "How to turn him on in 10 words or less," "Do You Make Men M-E-L-T? Take our quiz," "Bridal Special," Cosmo's stud search and "Cosmo's Most Famous Sex Tips; the Legendary Tricks That Have Brought Countless Guys to Their Knees." (Sex Trick 4: "Place a glazed doughnut around your man's member, then gently nibble the pastry and lick the icing . . . as well as his manhood." Another favorite Cosmo trick is to yell out during sex which of your girlfriends thinks your man is hot.)

At any newsstand, you'll see the original Cosmo girl's man-crazy, sex-obsessed image endlessly, tiresomely replicated, even for the teen set. On the cover of Elle Girl: "267 Ways to Look Hot."

"There has been lots of copying - look at Glamour," Helen Gurley Brown, Cosmo's founding editor told me and sighed. "I used to have all the sex to myself."

Before it curdled into a collection of stereotypes, feminism had fleetingly held out a promise that there would be some precincts of womanly life that were not all about men. But it never quite materialized.

It took only a few decades to create a brazen new world where the highest ideal is to acknowledge your inner slut. I am woman; see me strip. Instead of peaceful havens of girl things and boy things, we have a society where women of all ages are striving to become self-actualized sex kittens. Hollywood actresses now work out by taking pole-dancing classes.

Female sexuality has been a confusing corkscrew path, not a serene progressive arc. We had decades of Victorian prudery, when women were not supposed to like sex. Then we had the pill and zipless encounters, when women were supposed to have the same animalistic drive as men. Then it was discovered - shock, horror! - that men and women are not alike in their desires. But zipless morphed into hookups, and the more one-night stands the girls on "Sex and the City" had, the grumpier they got.

Oddly enough, Felix Dennis, who created the top-selling Maxim, said he stole his "us against the world" lad-magazine attitude from women's magazines like Cosmo. Just as women didn't mind losing Cosmo's prestigious fiction as the magazine got raunchier, plenty of guys were happy to lose the literary pretensions of venerable men's magazines and embrace simple-minded gender stereotypes, like the Maxim manifesto instructing women, "If we see you in the morning and night, why call us at work?"

Jessica Simpson and Eva Longoria move seamlessly from showing their curves on the covers of Cosmo and Glamour to Maxim, which dubbed Simpson "America's favorite ball and chain!" In the summer of 2005, both British GQ and FHM featured Pamela Anderson busting out of their covers. ("I think of my breasts as props," she told FHM.)

A lot of women now want to be Maxim babes as much as men want Maxim babes. So women have moved from fighting objectification to seeking it. "I have been surprised," Maxim's editor, Ed Needham, confessed to me, "to find that a lot of women would want to be somehow validated as a Maxim girl type, that they'd like to be thought of as hot and would like their boyfriends to take pictures of them or make comments about them that mirror the Maxim representation of a woman, the Pamela Anderson sort of brand. That, to me, is kind of extraordinary."

The luscious babes on the cover of Maxim were supposed to be men's fantasy guilty pleasures, after all, not their real life-affirming girlfriends.

Beauty

While I never related to the unstyled look of the early feminists and I tangled with boyfriends who did not want me to wear makeup and heels, I always assumed that one positive result of the feminist movement would be a more flexible and capacious notion of female beauty, a release from the tyranny of the girdled, primed ideal of the 50's.

I was wrong. Forty years after the dawn of feminism, the ideal of feminine beauty is more rigid and unnatural than ever.

When Gloria Steinem wrote that "all women are Bunnies," she did not mean it as a compliment; it was a feminist call to arms. Decades later, it's just an aesthetic fact, as more and more women embrace Botox and implants and stretch and protrude to extreme proportions to satisfy male desires. Now that technology is biology, all women can look like inflatable dolls. It's clear that American narcissism has trumped American feminism.

It was naïve and misguided for the early feminists to tendentiously demonize Barbie and Cosmo girl, to disdain such female proclivities as shopping, applying makeup and hunting for sexy shoes and cute boyfriends and to prognosticate a world where men and women dressed alike and worked alike in navy suits and were equal in every way.

But it is equally naïve and misguided for young women now to fritter away all their time shopping for boudoirish clothes and text-messaging about guys while they disdainfully ignore gender politics and the seismic shifts on the Supreme Court that will affect women's rights for a generation.

What I didn't like at the start of the feminist movement was that young women were dressing alike, looking alike and thinking alike. They were supposed to be liberated, but it just seemed like stifling conformity.

What I don't like now is that the young women rejecting the feminist movement are dressing alike, looking alike and thinking alike. The plumage is more colorful, the shapes are more curvy, the look is more plastic, the message is diametrically opposite - before it was don't be a sex object; now it's be a sex object - but the conformity is just as stifling.

And the Future . . .

Having boomeranged once, will women do it again in a couple of decades? If we flash forward to 2030, will we see all those young women who thought trying to Have It All was a pointless slog, now middle-aged and stranded in suburbia, popping Ativan, struggling with rebellious teenagers, deserted by husbands for younger babes, unable to get back into a work force they never tried to be part of?

It's easy to picture a surreally familiar scene when women realize they bought into a raw deal and old trap. With no power or money or independence, they'll be mere domestic robots, lasering their legs and waxing their floors - or vice versa - and desperately seeking a new Betty Friedan.

Maureen Dowd is a columnist for The New York Times. This essay is adapted from "Are Men Necessary: When Sexes Collide," to be published next month by G.P. Putnam's Sons.