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Author cuts across gender lines and mommy wars

by Michele Saracino



Ken Einhorn and Michele Saracino with their children, Roman and Penelope Einhorn

In a departure from the norm, NCR was sufficiently intrigued by a recent book to ask three of our younger married writers to review it. As a bonus, we asked the reviewers if they would mind introducing us also to their families. -- Arthur Jones, books editor

The New Feminist Agenda is a page-turner. That's what I told my husband when he asked me what I was reading. However, chatting with neighbors as our kids played, I did not dare reveal my secret summer reading. It seemed to pale in comparison with their discussion of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* book series. That uncomfortable dynamic alone reveals one of Madeleine M. Kunin's theses -- that we need to complete the feminist agenda of the '60s and '70s.



We need to be able to talk in our everyday lives as well as create policy for working

families. The mere fact that I feel like I have to apologize for sending my kids to child care after school so I can work, or that my husband does not feel comfortable at his job in child and family social services to ask for flexible time so he can be there for his children, is anecdotal evidence that Kunin, a former Vermont governor and government official during the Clinton administration, is right -- we need a new feminist agenda to deal with the unfinished feminist agenda.

I am one of the lucky ones. As a college professor and with extended support from family, I have a flexible schedule that allows me to 'cobble' together a life that allows me to work at home and at school. I get to do what Arlie Hochschild wrote about in the late '80s in *The Second Shift*, that after making their way into the workforce women find themselves also managing all the household duties as if they were stay-at-home moms. They have two shifts, two full-time jobs.

If I sound angry that might not be a bad thing. Kunin claims anger as a tool for getting individuals and groups engaged with family policy issues. Beyond anger, we need to be open to imagine new possibilities and be optimistic about reclaiming and redefining family values to consider working families as a social need and good -- a justice issue.



This is a hard sell in today's cultural climate. I often find myself

tiptoeing around the word *feminism* not only in my neighborhood, but even as I teach courses in feminist theology. Sometimes I get the impression from students that *feminism* is a dirty word. After exploring the challenges their parents face in trying to have it all or even have a little, then and only then can we talk feminism.

Kunin's work provides a tool for managing that minefield. Neither aggressive nor polemical, her work is an example of straight, honest talk that cuts across gender lines and the mommy wars. She looks at other countries -- not with a 'liberal' idealism but for data on how to get it right in the United States. Kunin shows how the Nordic countries have the most extensive parental leave policies, where fathers do not feel 'emasculated' for being at-home dads. France has universal nursery schools that would help in the U.S. with the increased pressure on youngsters to score on tests and for teachers to achieve these new pressurized goals. And Britain wields generous leave policies, which unfortunately might be in jeopardy with changing political tides.

How might the U.S. imagine family-friendly policy? There needs to be strong leadership and buy-in to the concept. In terms of leadership, Kunin finds that nations that have the most supportive family policies generally have strong labor unions and women in leadership positions. This is something to consider in a moment where unions have come under fire in the U.S. in secular and religious institutions. Also, she advocates collaborative leadership that works to build coalitions with other groups, including AARP, LGBT and disability activists.

In terms of how to get the general public to have a change of heart on family policy and buy into it, Kunin makes it plain that advocating for families, which includes paid parental leave, early-education programs, quality affordable child care and so on, is not just a gender concern but an economic one. Parents can't work if they don't have access to child care or if the cost of child care exceeds their income. Yet the more people we have working, the higher levels of long-term economic output and lower levels of poverty. Moreover, children who have access to early education are likely to perform better in schools and cost taxpayers less. While these economic issues are significant, the most powerful idea for me was that Kunin shows that these family issues are not bound to liberal or conservative politics, but at the heart of attaining the American dream.

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Reviews of *The New Feminist Agenda*

- Reclaiming a space for legitimate anger, reviewed by Michelle A. Gonzalez
- Author cuts across gender lines and mommy wars, reviewed by Michele Saracino
- Instead of having it all, a call for all to have, reviewed by Heidi Schlumpf

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