

# Choice, Preference and Utility: A Response to Sommers<sup>1</sup>

Christina Sommers chides “gender feminists” for ignoring what women actually want in order to promote what they believe women ought to want. Sommers, however, ignores the crucial distinction between what women choose, given their current alternatives and what women *would* choose if their options were less restrictive. The costs, benefits and risks of pursuing the same goals are different for women than they are for men, consequently women, acting as rational, self-interested and informed choosers will naturally make different choices from their equally rational, self-interested and informed male counterparts.

The flaws in Sommers’ defense of what she takes to be commonsense about real women’s real desires are, first, her failure to distinguish between what people choose, given the way things are, and what people would prefer all other things being equal and secondly, her proclivity for talking about desires and aversions, rather than preference rankings. Arguably, even if in making “traditional” choices women are doing the best they can for themselves in the circumstances, many would prefer to make their choices in different circumstances.

## I

Sommers is critical of gender feminists for (so she claims) refusing to take women’s wants seriously. As a “liberal feminist,” she declares, she “is not out to second guess what women want” and, citing numerous cases of women who make “traditional” choices, concludes that most women prefer traditional sex roles. Gender feminists, she suggests, do not “like” women:

[G]ender feminists sit in judgement on the majority of American women, and they disapprove of what they see. They look upon most women as benighted in what they aspire to, incorrect in what they swoon at, complicitous and servile in their preferences. In all these respects the feminists find women sadly deficient and lacking in pride.

The gender feminists are of course keenly aware that what women want is at odds with what the feminists believe they *ought* to want. One of the busiest areas in feminist theory is speculation about why women are so resistant to their own emancipation...

As a liberal feminist all I do promote is the right and liberty to live under the arrangement of one’s choice...I dislike seeing women made to feel guilty because they choose to lead conventional lives. I particularly dislike it when *feminists*...make women feel that fidelity to conventional gender roles is tantamount to a betrayal of women.<sup>2</sup>

Rhetorical flourishes aside, Sommers’ line of argument appears to be this: if women make free, rational and informed choices to remain faithful to conventional gender roles then there cannot

be anything wrong with a state of affairs in which they occupy such roles; [gender?] feminists claim that there is something wrong with such a state of affairs; therefore, they imply that women who choose to lead conventional lives are coerced, irrational or uninformed, benighted, complicitous, and servile.

This argument strategically ignores the distinction between choice and preference. Rational egoists often choose to pursue goals that they would not *all other things being equal* prefer because they recognize that the odds of achieving their preferred outcomes are low, the opportunity costs high, and the concomitants of success prohibitive. Even if, as Sommers suggests, most women choose to pursue “traditional” goals, it does not follow that these are the outcomes they would prefer all other things being equal. Arguably, a great many women who rationally choose traditional roles, in the work place and in the home, are making the best of a relatively bad thing.

There is evidence to suggest that this is the case in the literature on women’s labor force participation. *Prima facie*, the data appear to support Sommers’ contention that women prefer *la difference*. A little reflection however reveals that many differences in male and female occupational choices can be explained by reference to differences in the way men and women fare in the labor market, in particular to the effects of continuing discrimination against women in hiring and promotion, and to the ongoing harassment of women who succeed in getting “men’s jobs.” While this does not show that in the absence of such treatment men and women would choose the same occupations in the same proportions, it should make us skeptical about Sommers’ appeal to the raw data of women’s choices to show that women by and large prefer traditional sex roles.

Consider the following facts which appear to support Sommers’ case. Although sex segregation is diminishing in the professions and middle management, overall it is still very much the rule rather than the exception. Furthermore, while the entry of women into the higher echelons of business and the professions may be blocked by glass ceilings and glass walls, sex segregation in traditional blue collar trades, which remains almost complete, appears to be due in large part to women’s own occupational choices. Women do not generally apply for jobs as cab drivers, mobile carpet cleaners or exterminators; they do not sign on for training as welders or mechanics, or for apprenticeships in plumbing, electrical work or carpentry.

Here, it appears, we have the strongest possible support for Sommers’ thesis. Feminists, in the interest of promoting androgyny, deplore sex segregation in the labor market. Yet it is women themselves who *choose* the sexual division of labor. Women, it seems, do not want to be mechanics or plumbers. It is hard to see what would be gained by forcing women into jobs they do not want in the name of emancipation, or by condemning women who have a preference for less physically taxing office jobs where they can dress up for work. If indeed women have a preference for traditional pink-collar work, then one can only agree with Sommers that it is pointless to push them into “non-traditional” jobs in order to promote the androgynous ideal favored by some feminists.

Nevertheless, it is not clear that differences in male and female occupational choices faithfully reflect a difference in preferences. The gender classification of work at different times and in different places has varied. In medieval England, brewing was an exclusively female profession; in the 19th century, secretarial and clerical work was almost exclusively male. Even more interestingly, women have been happy to enter non-traditional occupations when they have been recruited, welcomed and given the opportunity to work alongside other women. During World War II, women performed with distinction in a variety of blue collar factory positions and only returned to traditional women's jobs with great reluctance when they were fired or demoted to make room for returning GIs.<sup>3</sup> There is some reason, therefore, to believe that women's occupational choices are the result as well as the cause of sex segregation in the labor market .

“Most women,” writes economist Barbara Bergmann, “take the division of jobs into ‘men’s jobs’ and ‘women’s jobs’ as a fact of life.

They do not waste time or court rejection by trying to breach the boundaries of the female ghetto...The women who do aspire to get berths in ‘men’s jobs’ are kept off balance by a host of practices and policies that employers and male workers use to exclude and discourage them...Here are the experiences of a woman who wanted to be a carpenter and who did succeed:

“I started work as a carpenter in the early 1970’s. I was able to pressure a local contractor, a friend, into hiring me as an apprentice. He encouraged me to join the union. I was already on a union job in 1980, but not yet admitted to the union. They were waiting to see if I would ‘go away.’ Two other females [were allowed to] join at the same time. Since then none has been allowed to receive apprentice or journeyman books. There were 450 males in the local and the 3 of us...

“The first outfit I was employed at, the supervisor was exceptionally good and fair, but the men hired were a rowdy group in general. They were openly hostile and verbally abusive to me and the other females. My carpenter steward treated me with constant verbal sexual abuse in order to be macho and get a laugh on me for the boys to share...

“A foreman on another job had sworn he’d never have a woman on his crew, and management put me on his crew to spite him. Of course he proceeded to punish me...At lunch break I was excluded from conversations and at times the men wouldn’t move over to allow me a space at the table. I was isolated working, too--sent off on a trivial, meaningless job or on a job involving extreme endless repetition...

“My solution was to find a good company, which I eventually did--that is unlikely for all of us to be able to do. There are too few ‘good outfits.’”<sup>4</sup>

A woman might prefer to be a carpenter all other things being equal, but choose to train as, e.g., a dental hygienist because she recognizes that given ongoing discrimination in employment, particularly in blue-collar trades, her chances of getting a job as a carpenter on completion of her training--on the off-chance that she succeeds in getting an apprenticeship--are low and because she knows also that if she eventually finds work, she will probably be isolated as the only woman on the job and will likely be hassled and forced repeatedly to prove herself. By contrast, she knows that if she trains as a dental hygienist she has a good chance at a reasonably desirable job where she will not be isolated, hassled or forced to prove herself. Even if a woman prefers carpentry to cleaning teeth, her decision, as a rational chooser, will depend on *how much* she prefers it: is her preference strong enough to offset the costs and risks of attempting to break into a "man's job"? Where the costs and risks of attempting to get work that has historically been reserved for men have been cranked down to levels approaching the male norm, as they have in some professional and entry-level managerial areas, women apply; where the risks are high and the costs remain prohibitive most women, quite reasonably, stay away.

Sommers in short has her facts right: more women choose to pursue traditionally female vocational objectives than "non-traditional" jobs. What she ignores are the crucial counterfactuals. Would women make these choices if it weren't for continuing discrimination in employment, the absence of a critical mass of women in non-traditional areas, and the difficulties that women face in such adverse circumstances? Like Sommers, I think it highly unlikely that women who make "traditional" choices, vocational or otherwise, are either brainwashed or coerced. It does not follow however that women who choose traditional outcomes prefer them *all other things being equal* or, in particular, that they would choose traditional roles if they had the same options as their male counterparts.

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that when women and men have the same options they tend to make the same choices. Consider another fact which seems to support Sommers' thesis, namely, that female workers as a group exhibit higher rates of absenteeism and job turnover than male employees--a phenomenon which makes employers reluctant to invest in women through training and opportunities for promotion.

Numerous studies show that the best predictor of behavior on the job is the nature of the job: workers in unskilled, poorly paid, dead-end positions tend to be absent more often than employees with more desirable jobs, to quit more frequently and generally to exhibit less commitment to the job. And as it turns out, women are disproportionately represented in these positions.

Further, studies of male and female employees' absenteeism, quit behavior and the like in fact strongly suggest that the difference in the male and female performance on the job in the aggregate is due precisely to the fact that proportionately more women than men are locked into boring, poorly paid positions without real opportunities for advancement, where commitment to the job simply does not pay.

Productivity differences among workers reflect, in part, the decisions they make whether or not to continue their schooling, participate in a training program, remain continuously in the labor market, etc. Faced with discrimination against them in the labor market, women may have less

incentive to undertake such human capital investments. If such indirect or feedback effects of labor market discrimination exist, they are also expected to lower the economic status of women relative to men.

As Kenneth Arrow has pointed out, the consequences of statistical discrimination are particularly pernicious where there are feedback effects. For example, if employers' views of female job instability lead them to give women less firm-specific training and to assign them to jobs where the costs of turnover are minimized, women have little incentive to stay and may respond by exhibiting exactly the unstable behavior that employers expect. Employers' perceptions are confirmed, and they see no reason to change their discriminatory behavior. Yet, if employers had believed women to be stable workers and had hired them into positions that rewarded such stability, they might well have been stable workers!...

On the average, women are indeed more likely to quit their jobs than men. However, most of this difference is explained by the types of jobs women are in. The evidence suggests that among both blacks and whites, when a woman worker is confronted with the same incentives to remain on the job in terms of wages, advancement opportunities, etc., she is no more likely to quit than a comparable male worker.<sup>5</sup>

The rational choices of women and their employers thus generate a vicious circle: employers don't invest in women because women don't invest in work and women, by and large, don't invest in work because employers don't invest in women--not because of some independent proclivity women have for domesticity. In short, there is strong empirical evidence that suggests that, at least in the labor market, a good deal of the difference between the choices men and women in the aggregate make can be accounted for by the differences in their circumstances and opportunities which are often, as noted above, locked in by feedback effects.

## II

In addition to fudging on the commonsensical distinction between choice and overall preference, Sommers also conveniently ignores the commonplace that people do not simply have desires and aversions but rather exhibit preference rankings.

Currently, most women live in the sort of arrangement that Sommers characterizes as the "traditional" or "natural family" which "consists of two heterosexual parents and one or more children in which the mother plays a distinctive gender role in caring for the children"<sup>6</sup> whether she works outside the home or not. It seems highly likely that most women prefer living in such households to remaining childless and to living alone, with female partners or in less traditional communal arrangements. Most women, regardless of their social and economic circumstances, are heterosexual and want families. The same is true of most men.

It is far less clear, however, that most women prefer playing a distinctive gender role within their households to more egalitarian domestic arrangements. Women in traditional pink-collar positions who have no prospects for advancement and earn little more than the cost of child care certainly prefer to stay at home to care for their children and attend to domestic tasks. By contrast, professional women, who generally have more cooperative partners than women of the

working class as well as salaries which enable them to buy adequate child care and domestic services, seem quite happy to play a far less distinctive gender role in the care of their children.

This suggests that many women who choose to remain at home to care for their children do so at least in part because their other options are relatively unattractive and even less personally gratifying. It is not clear that they would prefer to play this distinctive gender role even if they had the same alternatives as their male counterparts. Most women, quite reasonably, prefer staying at home to care for their children to the jobs that most women can get--clerical work, waitressing, cashiering, or caring for other people's children.<sup>7</sup>

Currently however most women do not have the option of remaining at home. With the decline of men's real income and an increasing appetite for consumer goods, most women have been pushed by [perceived] economic necessity into the labor force. The traditional family now most commonly takes the form of a household in which women work outside the home, typically at traditional pink-collar jobs, but nevertheless continue to play a "distinctive gender role" in the care of their children as well as other domestic tasks. This may well be the worst of all possible worlds for women. Working mothers in such circumstances miss out on both the autonomy and the very real pleasures of homemaking, which the shrinking minority of full-time career housewives enjoy, as well as the job satisfaction and prospects of advancement available to the relatively few working women who have broken out of the pink-collar ghetto. They end up working a double-shift at two jobs rather than one career. As economist Juliet Schor notes in her recent critique of the work ethic,

Many working mothers live a life of perpetual motion, effectively holding down two full-time jobs. They rise in the wee hours of the morning to begin the day with a few hours of laundry, cleaning, and other housework. Then they dress and feed the children and send them off to school. They themselves then travel to their jobs. The three-quarters of employed women with full-time positions then spend the next eight and a half hours in the workplace.

At the end of the official work day it's back to the 'second shift'--the duties of housewife and mother. Grocery shopping, picking up the children, and cooking dinner take up the next few hours. After dinner there's clean-up, possibly some additional housework, and, of course, more child care...

By my calculations, the total working time of employed mothers now averages about 65 hours a week. Of course, many do far more than the average--such as mothers with young children, women in professional positions, or those whose wages are so low that they must hold down two jobs just to scrape by. These women will be working 70 to 80 hours as well. And my figures are extremely conservative: they are the lowest among existing studies.<sup>8</sup>

Most married women who work outside the home do indeed spend more time on child care and much more time on housework than their husbands. The reason for this may be that women prefer to play a distinctive gender role in child care, as Sommers suggests--and in washing,

ironing and trash removal as well. Or it may be that men, by and large, will not take on these responsibilities. Old habits, after all, die hard and even men who sincerely try to do their fair share of the housework just do not hear the dishes in the sink crying “wash me, wash me.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition, entrenched institutional policies and the expectations of others make it easier for women than it is for men to devote time to caring for their children. Schools, for example, regardless of parental instructions, invariably call mothers rather than fathers when a child is sick and must be taken home; and employers are generally more tolerant of women who take time off to care for sick children than they are of men.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, the fact that most women voluntarily play a distinctive gender role in child care and domestic tasks does not by itself show that women would prefer to play this role all other things being equal. It seems more likely that, while most women prefer living in heterosexual relationships to living alone, communally or with female partners, few can get their male partners to share domestic tasks in an equitable fashion or afford to hire substitutes to relieve them of their “distinctive gender role” in child care.

### III

Conservative critics of feminism, including those like who, like Sommers, claim to be both liberals and feminists, assume that women currently have the same options as their male counterparts and then point to the fact that women, by and large, still make different choices from their male counterparts as evidence that most women prefer *la difference*. The assumption is however, plainly false. Formal political equality did little to open new opportunities for women or materially improve their lives. Long after women had won the right to vote, serve on juries and hold public office, they were excluded from educational and vocational opportunities available to men. Currently legislation mandating equal opportunity in employment is routinely ignored and women who succeed, against the odds, in breaking into “non-traditional” jobs are treated very differently from their male colleagues. It should scarcely be surprising that most women prefer traditional roles to non-traditional roles *under conditions such as those described by Bergmann’s carpenter*. This does not however show that most women would prefer traditional roles to non-traditional roles *under the conditions on which they are available to most men*.

Furthermore, even apart from ongoing discrimination in hiring and harassment on the job, women remain at a disadvantage because they continue to work the double shift.

The market appears to treat women as individuals in their own right...

However, so long as women carry the double burden of unpaid work in the reproduction and maintenance of human resources as well as paid work producing goods and services, then women are unable to compete with men in the market on equal terms. Legislation for equal pay and opportunities and diminution of ‘traditional’ barriers to women working outside the home cannot by themselves free women from domestic burdens and expectations. Access to markets has benefits for women, but those benefits are always limited, even if markets are entirely free from

gender discrimination. Benefits are limited because the reproduction and maintenance of human resources is structured by unequal gender relation...

Women with high incomes can reduce their disadvantage in the market relative to men by buying substitutes for their own unpaid work--employing cleaners, maids, nannies, and cooks. But even this does not obliterate their disadvantage, as they still have responsibility for household management. All other women who are not in the highest income groups do not have this option and must undertake a 'double day' of work.<sup>11</sup>

The moral is that a little feminism is a dangerous thing insofar as it burdens women with wage labor in addition to domestic work, without the opportunities men have in the labor market or the support services they enjoy at home. If women reject this state of affairs it may not be, as Sommers suggests, because feminism has gone too far but rather because it has not, yet, gone nearly far enough.

#### IV

Like Sommers, I am a great admirer of Mill; however, unlike Sommers I am not a Liberal Feminist but an Act Utilitarian Feminist. That is why I have been chiefly concerned with economic issues, in particular women's situation in the labor force. Much, much more utility hangs on the sort of work women do both in the home and in the labor force, day by day for the greater part of their adult lives, and the economic status they enjoy as a consequence, than on candlelight dinners, "male gallantry," *wickedly* high heels, elaborate white weddings or erotic fantasies about Rhett Butler, to cite some of the entries on Sommers's list of traditional female desiderata. Furthermore, even though I do not see why candlelight dinners and the like should be incompatible with equality in the home and the work place, I would bet, and bet heavily, that if women for some reason had to choose, the overwhelming majority would prefer a fair crack at traditionally "male" jobs in the labor market, *under the conditions that men occupy them*, and a more equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities at home to high heels and Rhett Butler.

Sommers asks repeatedly: if women *choose* traditional roles, where's the beef? Like Sommers, I do not believe that women who make these choices are uninformed, coerced or "brainwashed" or that the outcomes they choose are degrading, oppressive, or inimical to human flourishing. There is, however, evidence to suggest that the objectives that many women choose to pursue may be remote from the outcomes that they would prefer, all other things being equal, and represent accommodations to a discriminatory environment. The beef, therefore, is that many women who make traditional choices, freely and rationally, are making the best of a bad thing and realizing less utility than they would if their options were less restrictive.

Like Sommers, I see no compelling reason to think that women who choose "traditional" roles are either brainwashed or coerced, or that traditional femininity is degrading, oppressive, or incompatible with human flourishing. I just believe that, as a matter of empirical fact, more utility would be generated for both men and women in a society without sex roles, where men and women realistically had the same options at the same costs.

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Bob Burns, Ann Cudd, Jane Duran, Joe Ellin, Sasha Miller and Justin Schwartz for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup>Christina Sommers. "Do These Feminists Like Women?" *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*, 91:1 (Spring 1992) p. 85-87.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g. Maureen Honey. *Creating Rosie the Riveter*. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984. "Surveys taken in 1944 revealed that 75 to 80 percent of women in war production areas planned to remain in the labor force after victory was won, and they wanted to keep the jobs they were then performing. In late 1945 and early 1946, the Women's Bureau found evidence of worker dissatisfaction with being fired from war jobs and offered work in female fields. It described laid-off welders and riveters as 'reluctant to return to household work [paid domestic work], and also to other services, and to the more unattractive and low-paid clerical work as well.' Another Women's Bureau study confirms the fact than many women were unwillingly channeled into prewar fields...The dominant image of the war worker's eager return to the home in the media belied the reality of women's resistance to losing their improved status in the work force as well as the fact that most needed to find alternative employment." [p.23]

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Bergmann. *The Economic Emergence of Women*. (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pp. 88-90

<sup>5</sup>Francine D. Blau and Marianne A. Ferber. *The Economics of Women, Men and Work* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986) pp. 229, 254. Blau and Ferber refer to Kenneth Arrow, "The Economic Dimensions of Occupational Segregation: comment I" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 3, pt. 2 (Spring 1976): pp. 233-37. See also Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn, "Race and Sex Differences in Quits by Young Workers," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 34, No. 4 (July 1981): pp. 563-77 and W. Kip Viscusi, "Sex Differences in Worker Quitting," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 62, No. 3 (August 1980): pp. 388-98. For similar findings with respect to sex differences in absenteeism, see Paul Osterman, "Sex discrimination in Professional Employment: A Case Study," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 32, No. 4 (July 1979): pp. 451-64

<sup>6</sup>Christina Sommers. "Do These Feminists Like Women?" *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*, 91:1 (Spring 1992) p. 86.

<sup>7</sup>When I was a child it was a commonplace amongst women that having a baby was a way out of the labor force. I remember my mother remarking of my cousin Joanie, a 1st grade teacher, "She couldn't face those 30 little stinkers another day so she got pregnant as soon as possible."

<sup>8</sup> Juliet B. Schor. *The Overworked American*. Basic Books, 1991.

<sup>9</sup>As Schor notes, "Solid majorities of both women *and* men now believe that when a woman works for pay, household responsibilities should be shared...of course old habits die hard and

many men who 'believe' in sharing housework are not actually willing to take on much of this often-unrewarding work. Twenty-four percent of employed wives are still saddled with all the household work, and an additional 42 percent do 'the bulk' of it." Op. Cit., p. 104.

<sup>10</sup>Citing extensive historical data concerning child-rearing practices, Schor argues also that "what is seen today as a deep biological bond between...mother and child is very much a social construction." Op. Cit., pp. 90ff.

<sup>11</sup>Diane Elson. "From Survival Strategies to Transformation Strategies: Women's Needs and Structural Adjustment," pp. 37-38 in Lourdes Benería and Shelley Feldman, eds.. *Unequal Burden*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992.