

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Whether or not women should pursue a career after having children has long been deliberated and argued, particularly since the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's landmark book *The Feminine Mystique*. The contention surrounding the issue hasn't abated, and the provocative thesis at the heart of Leslie Bennetts' *The Feminine Mistake*—that by leaving the workforce, women sacrifice their autonomy and jeopardize their financial security—is sure to spark even more debate. The questions below are intended to assist your book group's discussion of *The Feminine Mistake*; to further enhance your conversation, consider assigning your group parts or all of Friedan's classic to read and incorporate into the dialogue (excerpts from the book are found easily online).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In Chapter Two, one of the interview subjects says, "I think women are programmed or led to believe that we'll be taken care of," (Diane Miller, page 33). Do you agree with this statement? If so, who does the "programming?" What purpose does it serve? If you don't agree, why do you think women such as Diane Miller feel this way?
2. As you grew up, were there women in your family who worked outside the home? What did you think of their choice to do so? Did your attitude change as you grew older?
3. "I don't think society grooms girls to be the achievers the way it still grooms boys to be achievers," (Sylvia Law, page 38). How were you raised to view achievement and success? Do you think you were given a different message than boys? If so, why?
4. Discuss this assessment by the author: "But there are frustrations and obstacles in any career, and when men hit roadblocks, they figure out ways to get around them. For women, however, having children provides the perfect excuse to give up. Instead of finding more meaningful work, or more flexible work, or figuring out new strategies to overcome barriers, they decide to exit the arena entirely," (page 45). Do you think that women use children as an excuse to opt out of working? Is it harder for women to overcome obstacles in their careers when they have children?
5. "Researchers found college students would be less likely to hire a woman with two children than they would be to hire a woman with identical qualifications who had no children, New York's *Daily News* reported recently," (page 85). What do you think is behind this bias against working mothers? Do you think this attitude can change?

6. Bennetts details the uproar that ensued after *New York Times* editor Joyce Purnick declared that her decision not to have children allowed her to reach the height of her profession and that “women who have children get off track and lose ground,” (page 132). Neil French, worldwide creative director of the communications giant WPP Group, was forced to resign when he made similar statements (page 133). Former Harvard University president Lawrence Summers also ignited a firestorm with his assertion that innate differences between the sexes might explain why women don’t reach high positions in math and science in academia, and left his job as a result of the subsequent furor (page 294). Discuss these and other controversies. Is it surprising that a woman feels that other women can’t achieve success at work because of children? Do you think there is truth in Purnick, French, or Summers’s statements? Is it a coincidence that the men in question were forced to quit their positions but Purnick was not?
7. “Perhaps younger women don’t understand the appeal of combining work and family because we failed to tell them how great it could be,” (page 154). What do you consider to be the benefits of being a working mom? Do you agree that the younger generation hasn’t been exposed to this lifestyle’s positive aspects?
8. If you are married or in a relationship where your finances are merged with your partner’s, who is in charge of the money? How did you work out this arrangement? Are you satisfied with it? Do you feel if you’re financially dependent it gives you less power in your marriage?
9. “My identity as a worker is the bedrock of all other identities in my life,” (Kathleen Gerson, page 175). From what aspect or aspects of your life do you draw your identity?
10. The author states that there is virtually no research supporting the idea that children of stay-at-home mothers do better in school and are better socialized than the children of working moms. And in fact, “An even more crucial determinant of children’s well-being is the emotional and mental health of the mother,” (page 269). Despite this, however, the notion persists in society that kids with stay-at-home moms fare better than their counterparts. Why do you think this is so?
11. Many stay-at-home moms believe they have one of the most challenging and difficult jobs around, but many employers fail to take that into consideration when evaluating candidates for hire. Why do you think this is so? If you left the workforce for a few years,

do you think you'd be able to return at the same level of salary and responsibility you achieved before you left? Why or why not?

## QUESTIONS FOR THE AUTHOR

1. Out of all the women you interviewed for *The Feminine Mistake*, did any of their stories particularly stand out for you? Why?

The interviews that had the greatest impact on me were the heartbreaking stories of women who either didn't pursue serious careers or who gave them up to stay home with their children, only to find themselves in desperate straits later on when their husbands unexpectedly died, became incapacitated or divorced them. These women felt such overwhelming grief, anger and betrayal; they had done what society tells them to do, and what they thought was best for their families -- but the consequences were terrible, and many were very frightened about their futures. In my interviews, I was also really struck by the difference between younger women, who are more likely to defend the stay-at-home choice very aggressively, and older women who had realized too late how much they had given up and often felt tremendous regret about having abandoned careers they were unable to reclaim after their children were older.

2. You talked to many young women who dismissed the idea of planning for their husband's death, illness, or departure as cynical or negative. What was your attitude toward such matters when you were first married? Did it change as you and your husband grew older?

My attitude hasn't changed since I married my husband nearly 20 years ago. During the thirty-plus years that I've been a reporter, I've interviewed hundreds of unhappy women who felt powerless to control their own destinies, escape abusive or miserable marriages, pursue educational or career goals, or provide adequate opportunities for their children because they didn't have the money to do so. It was always very clear to me that economic self-sufficiency gives women the options and the freedom to do what they need to do. My views were also influenced by the fact that economic dependency was disastrous for my grandmother; relying on my father to manage our family's financial affairs turned out to be a big mistake for my mother as well. As a result, I have never, at any age, felt it was safe to depend on any man for financial support; so many unexpected things can happen in life. I would feel too vulnerable if I were relying on someone else to support me, and I would feel as if I were exposing my children to unfair and unnecessary risks. I've never been willing to take such a big gamble on my children's futures.

3. On page 135, you describe your agonizing decision to cancel a book contract because of the pressure you were under at the time to care for your family and maintain your career as a journalist. Some might consider it a sound decision that preserved your sanity; you characterized your return of the advance money as "an acknowledgment of defeat." Why did you feel this way?

I felt very guilty that I hadn't lived up to the responsibility I had taken on, and I felt very

inadequate in comparison with the supermom myth that you can do everything if you're just efficient enough. But there are only 24 hours in a day, and I had a colicky baby and wasn't getting any sleep. It just wasn't the right time for me to write a book in addition to performing on the job and caring for my children; I wasn't willing to sacrifice their needs to that goal. At the time, I didn't fully understand the importance of taking the long view, which I discuss in my book. When you have young children and a job and are feeling overwhelmed, you don't necessarily realize that this phase won't last forever. Your children grow up, and surprising amounts of time and energy become available to you as they get older. Professional goals you've had to defer can be accomplished later on, as long as you haven't given up the career itself.

4. You write of when your husband lost his job, and you became the family's sole breadwinner for a while. Did this affect your relationship with him in any way? How did he feel that you were the only one supporting the family?

My husband's unemployment was very stressful for the entire family, but all of us felt tremendous relief that I could compensate for his lost earnings during that period. He was also very grateful that he could take enough time to find a new job he really wanted, rather than just jumping at the first thing that came along out of sheer desperation, because I was able to support our family during his job search. My income minimized the impact of the whole experience so that it was just an unpleasant interlude rather than a complete financial catastrophe.

5. One of your interview subjects laments that she doesn't see any "young Gloria Steinems" among today's younger women (page 296). Do you feel the same way?

I think that there's been a noticeable absence of activism and leadership among younger women, who often take for granted the opportunities that were won by the first wave of the modern women's movement -- and frequently don't seem to feel any responsibility to address the problems that remain. I'm hoping this will change, because if women ever really mobilized around the issues that concern us all, we could transform society for the benefit of everyone, including men and children. But things are not going to change as long as so many women keep forfeiting the kind of visibility and power that would enable them to have a real impact.

6. Do you think mothers who have their children when they're older and more established in their careers have a better chance of remaining in the workforce than younger moms who haven't been working as long?

If you've earned some solid credentials and established a substantial track record of success in your career, it's easier to create opportunities and arrange the flexibility to care for your family. For me, it worked out extremely well to have my children late, at 39 and 42, although declining fertility is always a risk when women wait that long. Other people have their kids earlier, while they're establishing their careers, and I've known many women who made things work that way instead. But no matter how old women are when they become mothers, I think it's important for them to identify their individual passions and pursue challenging careers that give their lives meaning and fulfillment, as well as the ability to support their children if something happens to their fathers.

7. Have your children read *The Feminine Mistake*? What did they think of it?

Nick's answer: I found it fascinating to watch how an idea became an essay that became a book. I think a lot of people don't understand a lot of the information that's presented in this book, and one reason they continue to take these risks is because they're unaware of them. I hope that this book makes the information they need more accessible.

Emily's answer: I've always been aware of my mother's views on these subjects, and her values have shaped my own. She's brought me up to understand that denial has never helped anybody; that you can't depend on somebody else for your well-being; and that you have to take things into your own hands, not only for your own sake but for the sake of your children. But I've seen my mother's views on these issues become stronger as she's watched what's happened to some of her friends as well as many of the women she's interviewed. I think it's great that other people will now be able to learn from this too.

8. What do you hope women will gain from reading *The Feminine Mistake*?

I think our culture has done a really bad job of educating women about the risks of economic dependency and the benefits of work, which are far greater than financial self-sufficiency alone. Many important factors are not well understood by most of the women who are dealing with these issues, and I hope my book will help address that information gap so that women can make decisions that work better for themselves and their children over the long run, rather than being blindsided by the unforeseen consequences of their choices after it's too late to do anything about them. That is unfair and unnecessary, and it's time for that to change.