

# “Stop Taking Our Privileges”: Phyllis Schlafly’s Narrative of Traditional Womanhood and the Fight for Socioeconomic Hegemony in the 1970s–1980s

Amélie Ribieras

Published: March 4, 2021

## Abstract

In 1972, when the U.S. feminist movement was proposing to implement gender equality through the Equal Rights Amendment, conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly launched a countermovement in order to revalue a woman’s place in the home. Arguing in favor a sexual division of labor, she defended the traditional vision of the family. According to Schlafly, marriage and motherhood provide women with advantages which they didn’t want to give up in exchange for equality. With the intention of defending their socioeconomic and cultural power, conservative women engaged in a political battle for their rights as housewives.

**Keywords:** Conservative Movement; Conservative Women; Phyllis Schlafly; Equal Rights Amendment; Eagle Forum.

**Amélie Ribieras:** Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle (France)

✉ [a.ribieras@laposte.net](mailto:a.ribieras@laposte.net)

Amélie Ribieras got a PhD in American Studies from La Sorbonne Nouvelle and she currently is a Temporary Lecturer and Research Assistant at Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne. Her research focuses on women’s involvement in the U.S. conservative movement from the 1970s onwards, through the example of Phyllis Schlafly and her organization Eagle Forum.

## 1 Introduction

The STOP ERA campaign officially began in the United States in 1972 with Phyllis Schlafly's pamphlet "What's Wrong with Equal Rights for Women?"<sup>1</sup> In her antifeminist manifesto, this Catholic conservative activist and mother of six children urged conservative women to mobilize to preserve traditional womanhood, threatened by the feminist movement which demanded equal rights for women.<sup>2</sup> Schlafly's wake-up call against their key measure, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), passed by both houses of Congress by 1972,<sup>3</sup> consisted in reaffirming the social model favored by conservatives, that was: a family unit where spouses had complementary responsibilities to best accommodate their and their children's emotional and financial needs. According to Schlafly, "American women never had it so good" and she asked, "Why should we lower ourselves to 'equal rights' when we already have the status of special privilege?"<sup>4</sup> Equality between the sexes was deemed to be degrading, since she considered that women had already been put on a pedestal. In order to counterattack the feminist rhetoric of liberation, Schlafly proposed to revalue the woman's role within the home and consequently she mobilized peers in her STOP ERA campaign, and later in her conservative organization, Eagle Forum (1975).

Schlafly questioned the core of feminism, namely, women's emancipation from patriarchal ideology, according to which women's alleged specific qualities were best exercised within the home. Part of her strategy revolved around the antagonism she formulated between the pursuit of equality and the maintenance of their social status. The power dynamics between men and women were portrayed as being very advantageous in the traditional family, embodied by a heterosexual married couple and their progeny. This ideal partnership, often found in the wealthier classes who could afford to depend on a "family wage" earned by the man, emerged as the new fortress to defend in the eyes of conservative women.

This mobilization against the ERA in the early 1970s needs to be understood in the context of the rise of the U.S. conservative movement. Since Alan Brinkley encouraged the historian community not to let American conservatism become the "orphan in historical scholarship," numerous works have been published on the subject.<sup>5</sup> This scientific project has also led scholars to consider a somewhat neglected facet of this field: the involvement of women in right-wing movements. Our examination of Schlafly's movement, therefore, follows groundbreaking research conducted on the intersection of the history of right-wing movements and that of women, which has led to recent works like Marjorie Spruill's *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values that Polarized American Poli-*

1. Phyllis Schlafly, "What's Wrong With Equal Rights for Women?," *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* (February 1972), <https://eagleforum.org/publications/psr/feb1972.html>.
2. The idea of traditional womanhood refers to a set of normative beliefs about woman's nature and activities which has regulated gender relations. Throughout American history, the female ideal was, for example, interpreted as being primarily linked to patriotism and maternity (Republican Motherhood), purity and submission (True Womanhood), or domesticity (within the nuclear family). See, for instance, Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective," *American Quarterly*, 28 (Summer 1976): 187-205.
3. The ERA was first proposed in 1923 by the members of the National Woman's Party led by Alice Paul but it was not voted on in Congress until 1972. It was then sent to the states for ratification, with a deadline established in 1979 (then extended to 1982). Because of a strong right-wing mobilization, it never became a reality. However, debates were recently revived as Virginia ratified the ERA in January 2020. It has now been approved by the necessary three-fifths of the states in order to become an amendment to the U.S. Constitution.
4. Schlafly, "What's Wrong."
5. Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *The American Historical Review*, 99 (April 1994): 409-429. Foundational works on the U.S. conservative movement include, for example, George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1976) or Leo Ribuffo's *The Old Christian Right: the Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983). After Brinkley's article, this literature was enlarged with works such as that of Kenneth D. Durr on conservatism in the suburbs (*Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore, 1940-1980* (Chapel Hill: The University of California Press, 2003)), that of Matthew D. Lassiter on the Sunbelt (*The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006)), that of Kim Phillips-Fein on conservative economics (*Invisible Hand: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2009)), that of Clyde Wilcox and Carin Robinson on religious conservatism (*Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics* (Boulder: Westview, 2011 [1996])), or that of Rick Perlstein on the rise of Ronald Reagan (*Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020)).

tics (2017), Karissa Haugeberg's *Women against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century* (2017) or Elizabeth Gillespie McRae's *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (2018).<sup>6</sup>

This article however adopts a sociological approach to the study of conservative women and it draws from the sociological theory of "gendered social movements."<sup>7</sup> It explores the influence of gender on the functioning of Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum. From this perspective, social constructions related to one's sexual identity can indeed be envisioned as both the basis and the product of protest and, therefore, disclose conservative women's production and reproduction of a normative gender ideology. The article will also examine the combination of class and gender, as we think that this intersection is of particular importance in the case of housewives. It definitely reveals the existence of their "gendered class interest," an expression coined by sociologist Susan Marshall in her book, *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage* (1997). Marshall explains how antisuffragist women fought to maintain their class hegemony and the traditional family by adopting the trope of "True Womanhood."<sup>8</sup> Married to socially recognized men, antisuffragists were also leaders in their communities and, "in the new gendered division of labor, elite men served class interests as institution-building entrepreneurs while women helped maintain group solidarity as cultural arbiters."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the women of Eagle Forum were more likely to conform to, and fight for, a gendered status quo that insured social prestige.

Therefore, the antifeminist fight led by Phyllis Schlafly did not only consist in acquiring more power for women, but, first and foremost, in preserving the socioeconomic and cultural influence they already enjoyed. She empowered conservative women by elaborating a collective identity, a concept appropriated by sociologists from the work of Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci.<sup>10</sup> For sociologists Francesca Polletta and James Jasper, a collective identity "describes imagined as well as concrete communities, involves an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of pre-existing bonds, interest, and boundaries. [...] It provides categories by which individuals divide up and make sense of the social world."<sup>11</sup> The collective identity of honorable housewives that Phyllis Schlafly put forward testifies to a discursive practice among American conservatives to manufacture the social construction around sexual differences.

Eschewing an approach which dismisses conservative mobilizations for what could be perceived as their backwardness or extremism, we wish to question the logics of domination and power at work in this gendered movement. In the first section, we will study Phyllis Schlafly's ideology regarding gender roles, before showing how it became a medium for antifeminist activism. Finally, we will discuss the parameters of men and women's participation in the movement in order to assess the scope of conservative women's subservience and autonomy.

6. Phyllis Schlafly's career has also been studied by Donald Critchlow in *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2005) and, before him, by journalist Carol Felsenthal in *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority: The Biography of Phyllis Schlafly* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1981). On right-wing women, one can also mention Catherine E. Rymph's *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage Through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) or Michelle M. Nickerson's *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

7. See, for example, the seminal work presented in the two issues of *Gender and Society* in 1998–1999, entitled "Gender and Social Movements" and coordinated by Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier.

8. See Mary L. Roberts, "True Womanhood Revisited," *Journal of Women's History*, 14 (2002): 150–55.

9. Susan Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

10. See, for instance, Alberto Melucci, "The Process of Collective Identity," in Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermands ed., *Social Movements and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 41–63.

11. Francesca Polletta and James Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movement," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27 (2001): 283–305.

## 2 The Patriarchal Ideology Defended by Phyllis Schlafly

Designing an appropriate place for men and women was integral to the social organization promoted by conservatives like Schlafly. Gender roles, influenced by essentialist beliefs and religious rigorosity, determined the identity of a woman.

### 2.1 A Circumscribed Female Identity

For Phyllis Schlafly, the female identity was to be deployed within a specific framework. In her 1977 book entitled *The Power of the Positive Woman*, she developed her argument regarding the origins of women's power and its boundaries. It was based on the premise that "positive" women drew their power from their female nature. In the chapter "Understanding the Difference," Schlafly reminds her readers that men and women are inherently different. The reaffirmation of sexual differences, a customary explanation for women's alleged inferiority, emerged as the cornerstone of her gendered discourse and it delineated her view of the female identity. Sexual organs, quantity of water, fat tissues, tendency to color blindness, life expectancy, and other physical features as well as physical endurance, emotional state and psychology belonged to a long list of differences that could not be ignored.<sup>12</sup> The reassuring belief in the existence of feminine womanhood and masculine manliness lies at the core of a traditional vision of society.

This essentialism also translated into the idea that women could only be fulfilled if they yielded to their bodily drives. More specifically, happiness depended upon their ability to live according to what made them uniquely female: the ability to give birth. Schlafly then advised that a woman should "rejoice in the creative capability within her body."<sup>13</sup> She encouraged women to celebrate their distinctive characteristics and see maternity as a source of power. The narrative of the "positive woman," whose tranquility and self-persuasion was asserted by Phyllis Schlafly, may have been an attempt to revive the spirit of Norman Vincent Peale's work. A popular American minister and lecturer, he lauded God's goodwill when linked to self-discipline and a positive attitude toward one's life in a best-seller entitled, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952).<sup>14</sup> Destabilized by the questioning of social norms by social movement activism in the 1960s, Schlafly offered a reassuring narrative about American society, which could only persist if people preserved traditional gender roles. She positioned herself as an expert in the issue of women's happiness and produced her own spiritual guidebook, as she hoped to strengthen her leadership role by delivering guidance on how to regulate gender behavior.

Additionally, such a positive outlook on life worked in connection with religious gendered prescriptions. In the previously mentioned chapter of her book, Schlafly argues that "It was self-evident to the Positive Woman that the female body with its baby-producing organs was not designed by a conspiracy of men but by the Divine Architect of the human race."<sup>15</sup> Her essentialist argument, consisting in restricting women to their procreative potential, stemmed from the precepts of the Church, which underlined God's intervention in the arrangement of gender roles. In her second book about women's power, *The Power of the Christian Woman* (1981), Schlafly openly refers to the Bible to remind her followers of their religious duty. Echoing *Genesis*, which teaches Christians to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Genesis 1: 28), she concludes that "the Christian woman looks upon the ability to participate in the creation of new life as God's greatest gift to women."<sup>16</sup> God's design was

12. Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishers, 1977), 11-21.

13. *Ibid.*, 11.

14. Phyllis Schlafly's book, in the wake of Norman Vincent Peale, corresponds to the premises of a "cultural movement" channeled by positive psychology, developed in the late 1990s. Disregarded as it was considered not scientific enough, Peale's tradition of "positive thinking," which stressed positivity at the expense of its sometimes needed opposite, negativity, was an attempt at providing a popular narrative of self-realization in the aftermath of the trauma occasioned by World War II (Daniel Horowitz, *Happier? The History of a Cultural Movement That Aspired to Transform America* (Oxford, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4-7.

15. Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman*, 15.

16. Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Christian Woman* (Cincinnati: Standard Pub, 1981), 12.

interpreted as a generous gesture, as well as a superior truth that translated into an honorable mission bestowed upon women.

Phyllis Schlafly's discourse on the purpose of womanhood contributed to granting women a dignified purpose, despite their circumscribed world. Conservative women were told to regard their familial status as the primary vector of their identity, even more so since this identity had socioeconomic implications.

## 2.2 The Partnership Between the Sexes

Conservative women's adherence to traditional gender roles could also be explained in relation to their male counterparts. If a woman was to become a mother, this was expected to happen within the specific framework of heterosexual marriage. Maternity, indeed, proceeded with marriage. Schlafly professed early on that "most women want to be wife, mother and homemaker—and are happy in that role."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the only legitimate social scenario for men and women was to get married and to have children.

The model of the married couple and their offspring living under the same roof, praised by Schlafly, was inscribed in a long tradition of regulations for gender relations. Some historians, such as Elaine Tyler May, explain that in the years after the Second World War a conformist discourse loomed over the American society.<sup>18</sup> Despite a return to a more prosperous economy, the citizenry worried about tensions with the Soviet Union, in the context of the Cold War. The family appeared as a new emotional safeguard against darker times, forecast by the nuclear threat, and traditional gender roles were revived. May conjures a notion of "domestic containment" to describe this renewed trust in the power of the family and the pressure put on women to refocus on the home.<sup>19</sup> This was transcribed into a new socioeconomic consensus called the "nuclear family," conveniently reframed as the new American dream. Such an ideal implied a sexual division of labor and a co-dependence of spouses whereby the man would provide for the well-being of his family through his professional activity and the woman would take care of the home and the children. Men and women, in their complementary roles of breadwinner and homemaker, formed a functional socioeconomic unit, ready to participate in the new consumption frenzy.<sup>20</sup> Hence, there were practical reasons for the marital union since it offered a socioeconomic partnership.

The core of Phyllis Schlafly's view on the family was this strict separation between male and female duties in an economic perspective. This was foundational to the "social relations of the sexes" (*rappports sociaux de sexe*), a concept developed by French sociologists. It highlights the primacy of the sexual division of work (both professional and domestic) in the consideration of women's domination and emancipation, and allows understanding of "the antagonistic dimension in the relations between the class of men and the class of women."<sup>21</sup> What represents the main ideological tool for social conservatives such as Schlafly is a fundamental inequality between the sexes, who are thus split between two interdependent economic classes. Of course, the social relations connecting men and women were not presented as a hardship but as the result of a natural complementarity, beneficial to both parties.

---

17. Schlafly, "What's Wrong?"

18. The seminal book, edited by historian Joanne Meyerowitz, entitled *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America: 1945–1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), offers a revisionist approach to this reading of the 1950s, arguing instead in favor of a "cultural complexity" (Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 5). The essays gathered in the collection question the primacy of the domestic stereotype by proposing a series of diverse narratives of women's experience that enriches our understanding of the period and questions May's vision of widespread domestic containment.

19. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 2008 [1988]).

20. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, NY: Vintage Book, 2003).

21. Roland Pfefferkorn, *Genre et rapports sociaux de sexe* (Lausanne: Editions Page deux, 2012), 53. Elaborated in France in the early 1980s, in conjunction with the notion of gender, more widely used in American research, it emphasized the socioeconomic construction underlying gender relations.

Far from the ordeal often described by some feminists, the family unit sealed by marriage was viewed as socioeconomic leverage from which women drew enormous advantages. From their status as wife, they derived invaluable protection, as Schlafly argued:

In America, a man's first significant purchase is a diamond for his bride, and the largest financial investment of his life is a home for her to live in. American husbands work hours of overtime to buy a fur piece or other finery to keep their wives in fashion, and to pay premiums on their life insurance policies to provide for her comfort when she is a widow [...]. In the States which follow the English common law, a wife has a dower right in her husband's real estate which he cannot take away from her during life or by his will [...].<sup>22</sup>

This allusion to a husband's duty to support his wife refers to a legal doctrine of marital unity implemented in the early years of the American colonies and inherited from Christian doctrine and English common law. As historian Nancy Cott has explained, men and women were bound by a contract called *coverture* that implied that a woman's earnings, property and labor were her husband's, in exchange for which he was legally required to provide for the couple.<sup>23</sup> This economic bargain aimed to reinforce the marital bond through mutual responsibilities.<sup>24</sup>

Phyllis Schlafly turned a blind eye on the potential constraints of traditional marriage and considered it solely beneficial for women as they financially profited from it. She argued that women should enjoy a home and the right to benefit from their husband's life insurance, estate and social security because these were some of the guarantees afforded by law, depending on the legislation in each state. Hence, Phyllis Schlafly restored the idea of marital support and made it a woman's right, more precisely, "a wife's right to support."<sup>25</sup> Framed as a lucrative benefit, it ensured women's financial stability and protection through marriage.

And to give more credit to her discourse on gender roles, Phyllis Schlafly felt the need to show how well it had worked in her own life. Consequently, she undertook to personify the female ideal she defended by advertising her successes as a wife, a mother, and a homemaker.

### 2.3 Embodying the Perfect Wife and Mother

Phyllis Schlafly wanted to prove that she had respected traditional gender roles. Yet, from the 1950s, as she was settling into her marital life, she demonstrated that she was a busy activist. Revealing, although unwillingly, that she was as well no June Cleaver, Schlafly was involved in projects ranging from giving speeches across the state of Illinois, to getting elected as a delegate at the Republican National Convention, and she even attempted to obtain a seat in Congress (in 1952 and 1970).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, throughout her career, Phyllis Schlafly put on various masks in order to play different roles while posing as a role model for other women.

She engineered her interviews with the media with the purpose of enhancing her reputation as a good wife. In January 1978, for instance, the Schlaflys were featured in the *Alton Telegraph*, a daily newspaper distributed in the city of Alton, Illinois.<sup>27</sup> The article focused on Phyllis Schlafly because she was then a rising figure in the conservative movement. Yet, the photograph that accompanied the text downplayed her career and focused instead on the couple in their traditional gender roles

22. Schlafly, "What's Wrong."

23. Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge Mass, London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11-2.

24. *Ibid.*, 50-3.

25. Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman*, 70.

26. June Cleaver was the main female character in the U.S. sitcom *Leave It to Beaver*, which was very popular in the 1950s. The Cleaver family was said to embody the postwar ideal of the suburban nuclear family. Our remark points to the aforementioned book edited by Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, which underlines the ambivalence of women's roles in the 1950s. Although Schlafly used the postwar discourse on domesticity to maintain a conservative sociocultural status quo, the ambivalence of her story is consistent with Meyerowitz's argument.

27. Walt Sharp, "At Home with the Schlaflys," *Alton Telegraph*, February 18, 1978 (Archives of Eagle Forum, Collection Phyllis Schlafly, Series ERA, subjects, Box 26, File 8).

inside the home. In the foreground, Fred Schlafly is reading the newspaper, occupying most of the space and, in the background, Phyllis Schlafly, elegantly dressed and groomed, is taking apples out of the oven. The journalist observed that "like an eager actress, she was concerned that the light was adequate for photographers and that she was always wearing an affable smile," which betrayed her preoccupation for the *mise en scène*. In this interview, the hierarchy of the sexes was staged, with both partners harmoniously assuming their respective roles of head of the family and homemaker. Phyllis Schlafly, shown as hospitable, nurturing, and humble, hoped to prove that she was fighting the battle against feminism from her kitchen, alongside her husband.

Moreover, the stakes of representation touched her duties as a mother. As though she felt the urge to justify herself, she took every opportunity to remind her followers about how efficiently she raised her children:

I'm a great believer that babies should be nursed by their mother. I nursed all my children for at least six months after they were born. Basically, after a birth, I kind of stayed on the second floor for about six weeks and devoted my attention to the baby.<sup>28</sup>

Nursing babies was presented as the ultimate proof of good mothering and, in her case, it demonstrated her conformity to the sociocultural model for which she advocated. This self-promotion was used to arouse admiration regarding her domestic achievements, despite her reputation as a modern woman.

Phyllis Schlafly's behavior was undoubtedly more transgressive than she was ready to admit. Her home was the embodiment of the traditional family but only on the surface. The reality behind the curtain was more complex since her domestic duties were alleviated by the presence of her housekeeper and her mother,<sup>29</sup> while her political activities invaded her private space as she had an office at home. She even competed with her husband on a professional level and this caused problems in her marriage. For instance, after she enrolled in law school in 1975, Fred Schlafly "had a tantrum" and their son, John, pointed out to his mother that she was "trying to take his law practice away from him."<sup>30</sup> While she recommended to "positive" women not to overpower their husband, Phyllis Schlafly did not abide by that rule. Her conformity to traditional gender roles was, hence, constantly counterfeited by role playing to conceal her personal ambitions.

For conservative women, the roles of wife and mother were structuring social identities from which they benefited and that they were not willing to give up in exchange for equality. Schlafly posed as the epitome of that model in order to inspire her peers, and she alerted them that, "the women's libbers [...] were waging a total assault on the family, on marriage, and on children."<sup>31</sup> Antifeminist women were on her side in a social movement designed to preserve the social norms they cultivated.

### 3 The Elaboration of a Collective Identity to Maintain Social Domination

Despite the admission that the man was the head of the household,<sup>32</sup> gendered constraints seemed more acceptable than economic insecurity, for these women. Further, the financial arrangement provided by the nuclear family protected women's interests and guaranteed a certain social standard. Yet, the feminist movement that took shape in the 1960s questioned traditional standards to offer new paths of emancipation for women, making conservatives fear for their socioeconomic capital.

28. Mark DePue, "Interview with Phyllis Schlafly," Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Oral History Program, Series "ERA Fight in Illinois," Clayton, Missouri, January 5-6 and 15, February 21-22, March 29-30, 2011, 57.

29. Carol Felsenthal, *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority, The Biography of Phyllis Schlafly* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 120.

30. DePue, "Interview with Phyllis Schlafly," 160.

31. Schlafly, "What's Wrong?"

32. In *The Power of the Christian Woman*, Schlafly recalls the well-known biblical verse of Paul, Ephesians 5: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (Schlafly, *The Power of the Christian Woman*, 56).

### 3.1 The Feminist Challenge to the Traditional Family

The fight led by the conservative women of Eagle Forum erupted in the political arena in reaction to the outbreak of the feminist movement. In the early 1960s, some progress had been achieved on women's rights as John F. Kennedy's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women issued a report entitled *American Women* (1963) with the goal of identifying the mechanisms of gender inequalities. Although the document attempted to raise awareness into the specificities of women's experiences, it did not go as far as expected. One must wait for the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* for a real turning point in the feminist mobilization. The author, journalist Betty Friedan, specifically focused on the "problem that had no name," which was suburban, middle class women's subjection to the myth of the perfect housewife:

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. [...] Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands.<sup>33</sup>

In the wake of Friedan's book, and because of political apathy,<sup>34</sup> numerous middle class women, often professionals, founded the National Organization for Women in 1966. Later in the decade, younger, more radical women, often marginalized in other social movements, such as the civil rights movement, developed their own feminist structures, the consciousness raising groups, where sharing one's experience led to "collective self-education."<sup>35</sup> Gender relations were studied in a new light and the personal issues in women's lives, such as sexuality, abortion, violence—to name but a few—became political.<sup>36</sup>

These feminist mobilizations, which gained political ground throughout the 1970s, triggered the rise of a countermovement, a social movement whose *raison d'être* is to react to specific social change or a movement defending such a cause.<sup>37</sup> The antifeminist movement founded by Phyllis Schlafly was named "the pro-family movement." The specific conflict regarding the family dynamic took shape because many feminists identified family as a primary vector of women's subjugation. For instance, in Kate Millett's writings, it was denounced as "patriarchy's chief institution" and a "financial unit, whereby it is committed to the idea of property in persons and in goods."<sup>38</sup> For Schlafly, it was as if feminists associated the family with prison, prostitution and slavery:

They view the home as a prison, and the wife and mother as a slave. [...] The women's libbers don't understand that most women want to be wife, mother and homemaker—and are happy in that role.<sup>39</sup>

Antifeminists resented feminist views of a woman's place within the family and they voiced their fears of losing their precious economic advantages, as the name of Schlafly's campaign testifies, since "STOP" in STOP ERA stood for "Stop Taking Our Privileges." The promise for equality was presented as a rollback of rights: "We do *not* want to trade our birthright of the special privileges of American women—for the mess of pottage called the Equal Rights Amendment."<sup>40</sup>

33. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, London: Norton & Company, 1997 [1963]), 5.

34. Despite the 1963 Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which respectively insured equal pay for equal work and added sex as a category to be taken into account in job discrimination cases, more was expected from women who were starting to advocate for their rights.

35. Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2003), 30.

36. One of their slogans, invented by the feminist Carol Hanisch in 1970, was "The Personal is Political."

37. See Tahī L. Mottl, "The Analysis of Countermovements," *Social Problems*, 27 (June 1980): 620-35; David S. Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity," *American Journal of Sociology*, 101 (May 1996): 1628-60.

38. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016 [1970]), 33, 124. She discusses the views of philosopher Friedrich Engels, author of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

39. Schlafly, "What's Wrong."

40. *Ibid.*



The feminist movement indeed posed a challenge to conservatives as it contested the established dynamics of power in the society. Looking to upgrade women's status, feminists questioned the instrument of conservative women's social base, the traditional family. This disruption caused these women to experience a devaluation of their socioeconomic and cultural influence.

### 3.2 Conservatives' Feeling of "Power Devaluation"<sup>41</sup>

This conservative women's movement was informed by a socioeconomic logic that consisted in preserving class hierarchy whose main cog was the traditional family. For French anthropologist Rémi Lenoir, the family is a "symbolic privilege: to be what is appropriate, to be in conformity with the official norm."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, what mattered in terms of social standards and influence was the familial structure, as entrenched in the social framework.

This conservative attitude towards one's socioeconomic status has already been addressed by historians. At one time, the consensual historiographic paradigm in the study of right-wing mobilizations was "status discontent." For example, in their well-known book *The Politics Of Unreason* (1970), Earl Raab and Seymour Martin Lipset envisioned the political mobilization of right-wing activists as the result of a fear of social decline and, therefore, a delusional concern of maintaining their social status within the American society. However, this theory has since been rejected by scholars on the grounds that it was psychologically-oriented and that it associated conservative protest with irrational behavior. Distancing themselves from this historiographic heritage, French sociologists Eric Agrikoliansky and Annie Collovald, nevertheless, encouraged researchers of right-wing movements to explore the protest strategies of the "dominant" classes in order to unravel the construction of social domination.<sup>43</sup> In their view, powerful individuals constitute a "mobilized class" and have a constant need to be reassured about their social position.

One finds traces of class preoccupation in Phyllis Schlafly's discourse and the fear of socioeconomic decline appears as a recurrent pattern. For example, in the issue of *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* of October 1974, which was Schlafly's newsletter, she circulated a series of vignettes displaying the financial consequences of the Equal Rights Amendment for the nuclear family.<sup>44</sup> Insisting on the vulnerability of the homemaker, one vignette shows a woman carrying a baby and a broom—symbolizing her domestic duties—and a new burden has been added on her back, the "50% financial burden," making her look miserable. Phyllis Schlafly argued that gender equality would impact the purchasing power of traditional couples and, as a consequence, women would be required to enter the job market to support their family, stripping from them their right not to work and to be financially supported. This symbolic marker of class, as well as the diamond, fur piece, finery and premiums on life insurance mentioned in her 1972 manifesto, not necessarily accessible to the average American couple, appeared as a privilege to fight for in the eyes of conservative women. They defended the lifestyle and the cultural characteristics that differentiated the classes.

Behind the battle for the nuclear family laid a preoccupation for class membership.<sup>45</sup> In order to thwart this alleged devaluation of power of traditional individuals, especially women, Phyllis Schlafly turned the status of housewife into the bedrock of conservative women's collective identity.

41. The expression was coined by sociologist Rory McVeigh who, in his examination of the Ku Klux Klan, argued that "conservative movements emerge in reaction to shrinking, rather than expanding, levels of power and influence." They, therefore, tend to oppose movements that benefit from social or cultural adjustments. Rory McVeigh, "Structural Incentives for Conservative Mobilization: Power Devaluation and the Rise of the Ku Klux Klan, 1915–1925," *Social Forces*, 77 (June 1999): 1461-96.

42. Rémi Lenoir, "Mouvement familial et classes sociales," *Savoir/Agir*, 26 (2013): 117-125.

43. Eric Agrikoliansky and Annie Collovald, "Mobilisations conservatrices: comment les dominants contestent-elles ?," *Politix*, 106 (2014): 7-29.

44. Phyllis Schlafly, "How ERA Will Affect Social Security," *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, October 1974 (Archives of the Library of Congress, Collection Herbert Philbrick, Box 173, File 12).

45. Without ever being openly dealt with at Eagle Forum, the preservation of white privilege—through the nuclear family—was also a preoccupation. Phyllis Schlafly's eloquent silence on the issue can be attributed to the fact that she was trying to accommodate different sensitivities. Not all women in her organization came from the South, where segregation was culturally entrenched; therefore, Schlafly never directly addressed race relations.

### 3.3 Traditional Woman: A Powerful Mobilizing Identity

At Eagle Forum, Phyllis Schlafly established a community organized around common characteristics and interests. The category “housewife” worked as a mobilizing identity at a time when women who devoted themselves to the home could have felt delegitimized by the feminist discourse.

The president of Eagle Forum engaged in a process of “identity deployment,” which consists in “expressing an identity such that the terrain of conflict becomes the individual person, so that the values, categories, and practices of individuals become subject.”<sup>46</sup> Phyllis Schlafly crafted a resonant narrative of empowerment with the aim of encouraging right-wing women to become involved in her movement. Her approach was notably to present homemaking as a career path and she defended the idea that “marriage and motherhood had always been the number-one career choice of the large majority of women.”<sup>47</sup> Domesticity was then equated with a professional activity, without, of course, being linked to any remuneration, as that would have devalued the provider’s role. Phyllis Schlafly transposed the gratifying feminist discourse which valued women’s work outside the home to the activities performed inside it.

For that matter, homemakers were complimented for playing their role. Every year, from 1985 onwards, the organization delivered the “Fulltime Homemaker Award” to ordinary women from the fifty states who dedicated their life to the home. As the introductory advertisement for the ceremony claimed, the social incentives to leave the home were so important that homemakers deserved to be applauded for their commitment:

The Fulltime Homemaker Awards are not intended to be judgmental about those choices, but are intended to honor those women who have chosen the traditional role of women despite the social pressures of the media and the feminist movement, and despite the economic injustice of the federal income tax law.<sup>48</sup>

While the prize awarded more visibility and recognition to average American women who were truly traditional, it was also granted to women who hardly fit the definition of the fulltime homemaker. The list of winners includes the wives of numerous politicians like Mrs. Rick Santorum, Mrs. Todd Akin or Mrs. Gary Bauer.<sup>49</sup> According to their biographical descriptions, they were all busy women, active in areas out of step with the traditional homemaker.

Thus, there was a fundamental contradiction in the political engagement of conservative women. While Phyllis Schlafly’s plan was to make the traditional identity a force to maintain a socioeconomic and cultural advantage, Eagle Forum also celebrated women’s participation in politics and social movements.

## 4 Whose Interests? Whose Power? Whose Gains?

The movement led by Phyllis Schlafly politicized right-wing women and directed their activism towards the preservation of traditional gender roles. In doing so, many of them, who would describe themselves as housewives, diversified their activities outside the home. It is worth investigating whose situation was indeed enhanced by the movement in order to determine if the adherents involved in Schlafly’s organization empowered themselves through protest.

### 4.1 “Homemakers as Policy Makers”

Phyllis Schlafly developed a dual discourse, encouraging women to cherish their place at home and to engage in politics at the same time. The social movement practices developed within her organization

46. Mary Bernstein, “Identity Politics,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 31 (2005): 47-74.

47. Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman*, 45.

48. Eagle Forum, “1985 Fulltime Homemaker Awards Sponsored by Eagle Forum,” August 1985 (Archives of Eagle Forum, Collection Eagle Forum, Series Education Fund, File 1).

49. Eagle Forum, “Homemaker Awards,” <https://eagleforum.org/projects/homemaker-awards.html>.

testified to this contradiction. On one hand, gendered modes of action such as coffee breaks, fashion shows, or “bread days” were organized to raise awareness—and money—on conservative issues and to lobby legislators.<sup>50</sup> These types of events exploited alleged female qualities of socialization and stewardship, which became tools for their political activism. Emphasis was also put on physical appearance and appropriate behavior because femininity and manners were seen as assets that could be instrumental when lobbying.<sup>51</sup> During the annual conference of the organization, called Eagle Council, Phyllis Schlafly taught her followers to smile, to wear the right amount of makeup, and to use their maternal instinct to lobby the legislators.<sup>52</sup> Part of her rationale was to present women’s political activities as an extension of their natural calling, domesticity and motherhood. Activities that displayed their allegedly natural nurturing side were favored at Eagle Forum over other activist formats, such as picketing, for example, although these too were occasionally used by the organization.

On the other hand, Phyllis Schlafly also expected that her peers become real “policy makers.”<sup>53</sup> Even if conservative women acted from the vantage point of the homemaker, they claimed a voice for themselves in the political arena and they took a step back from their domestic duties to become political women. Many of them were no longer just housewives and had expanded their area of action. Thanks to Phyllis Schlafly, who acted as an “agent of politicization,”<sup>54</sup> they were offered possibilities of self-fulfillment outside of the home. One member of Eagle Forum, Elaine Donnelly, spoke eloquently about the projects she decided to conduct:

Now some of the women who were inspired by Phyllis Schlafly went on to do other things, I’m one of them. Some ran for Congress, some ran for state legislature offices, some were appointed to Republican positions under Republican presidents, to administrative positions, some started their own organizations, and I’m one of those. I formed CMR [Center for Military Readiness] in 1993, next year is our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>55</sup>

After working for the STOP ERA campaign in Michigan, Donnelly became very interested in military issues and, among other things, she sat on the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (a governmental body issuing recommendations on the situation of women in the Armed Forces), before creating her own group. In her case, meeting Schlafly and taking part in her cause proved empowering on a personal level.

The articulation of an individual search for more autonomy with a defense of a social organization based on gendered hierarchies leads to a mix of both transgressive and normative behavior. It also reveals limits to these norms, which conservative women can subvert; this was primarily visible in their link to men.

## 4.2 Men’s Patronage

Despite the leeway in the combination of gender roles and political activity, patriarchy was the underlying structural element in conservative women’s space of expression. Although in the background, men’s involvement in the antifeminist cause was palpable at Eagle Forum. As Schlafly herself put it, “these women were mostly full-time homemakers who had supportive husbands who encouraged

50. Eagle Forum, Explanation Sheet about Coffee Breaks, date unknown (Archives of Eagle Forum, Collection Phyllis Schlafly, Series ERA, miscellaneous, Box 4, File 10); DVD 853: “EF Fashion Show,” August 20, 1984 and DVD 1144: “How to Lobby Effectively Panel,” September 23, 1995 (Archives of Eagle Forum, DVD Collection).

51. All the more so that it attempted to establish a contrast with the feminists who were seen as more aggressive and thus more masculine.

52. DVD 1129: “How to Communicate Eagle Forum’s Message: Appearance, Makeup and Dress,” September 8, 2000 (Archives of Eagle Forum, DVD Collection); STOP ERA, Program of Eagle Council, June 25-26, 1975, Springfield, Illinois (Archives of the Schlesinger Library, Collection Carabillo, Box 15. 10).

53. DVD 291: “PS Speech for Families in Crisis Seminar: Homemakers as Policy Makers,” May 9, 1981 (Archives of Eagle Forum, DVD Collection).

54. Myriam Aït-Aoudia *et al.*, “Indicateurs et vecteurs de la politisation des individus: les vertus heuristiques du croisement des regards,” *Critique Internationale*, 1 (2011): 9-20.

55. Author, “Interview with Elaine Donnelly,” phone, October 5, 2017.

them, the same as my husband encouraged me.”<sup>56</sup> Were they careful watchers or genuine supporters? One needs to bear in mind that the women who engaged in Schlafly's organization were able to devote some of their personal time to the movement because they were financially and emotionally supported by their partners. For example, Fred Schlafly helped his wife attack the women's conference in Houston in 1977: he initiated a lawsuit through his own law firm against the commission responsible for the summit.<sup>57</sup> His assistance was thus emotional, material, *and* ideological.

Men's often discreet backing of the movement led the organization to create an award to recognize their invaluable help, the Fred Schlafly Award. During the first ceremony in 2017, the husband of Gayle Ruzicka, who was president of Eagle Forum in Utah and mother of 12 children, received the prize.<sup>58</sup> Through Mr. Ruzicka, it was their functional relationship which was being recognized, despite the fact that Mrs. Ruzicka spent a lot of time volunteering for Eagle Forum. So far, this award has been granted to husbands of prominent activists of the organization, who dedicated most of their life to help Phyllis Schlafly and her cause.<sup>59</sup> This collective appreciation presented by the group was conservative women's way of showing their respect for the person they depended on and to stage the harmony within traditional couples.

Additionally, the antifeminist crusade was not only about praising men's role as provider but also protecting their masculine stature. As such, the role of breadwinner seemed to go hand in hand with men's "innate" nature. In an essay from her book *Who Killed the American Family?*, Phyllis Schlafly wrote that feminist ideas about women's financial emancipation undermined manhood and masculinity. "Men are getting false and confusing messages from society, the media, and women about what is man's role and what makes a man."<sup>60</sup> Warning against the emasculation of American men, she promoted the idea of the disappearance of the "real male" and the "crisis of masculinity." As clichés of antifeminist discourse, these ideas are put forward every time women question patriarchal norms and jeopardize the status quo, returning to claims of the existence of natural differences between men and women to defend the gender hierarchy.<sup>61</sup>

It could, therefore, be suggested that the defense of traditional womanhood and families concealed a defense of the traditional man. The modesty of husbands and their wives' determination to defend the structures that they benefited from expose the conservatives' plan to support patriarchy under the guise of the woman's cause. The activism of housewives proved pivotal for the conservative movement as they acted as a more acceptable showcase of conservative ideology.

### 4.3 Negotiating with Patriarchy?

Phyllis Schlafly's defense of traditional gender roles for men and women was ambiguous, raising the question of whether traditional womanhood was a facade for negotiating the norms to obtain benefits under the form of male protection and goodwill. Because they claimed to defend the interests of their family and husband, Schlafly's followers were authorized to leave the home and were tolerated in the public sphere, even if that meant subverting domesticity and granting women more autonomy.

On one hand, conservative women insisted on their fear of losing men's protection and hence refused the feminist emancipation. The president of the Nevada Eagle Forum chapter, Janine Hansen, affirmed that they were "defending [their] right to be women instead of to be liberated from men."<sup>62</sup>

56. Author, "Interview with Phyllis Schlafly," St. Louis, August 26, 2013.

57. Schlafly, Godfrey & Fitzgerald, "Lawsuit Filed against Commission on International Women's Year," April 9, 1976 (Archives of the Library of Congress, Collection League of Women Voters, Box 133, File "opposition anti-ERA literature 75-77"). After the United Nation's International Women's Year in 1975, American feminists organized a national conference on women's rights in the United States; it took place in Houston, Texas from November 18 to 21, 1977 and Phyllis Schlafly denounced the use of public money to stage such an event.

58. Author, Observation Notes from Eagle Council, Washington D.C., September 14-17, 2017.

59. Eagle Forum, "Fred Schlafly Award," <https://eagleforum.org/projects/fred-schlafly-award.html>.

60. Phyllis Schlafly, *Who Killed the American Family?* (Washington, D.C.: WND Books, 2014), 218.

61. Francis Dupuis-Déri, "Le discours de la 'crise de la masculinité' comme refus de l'égalité entre les sexes: histoire d'une rhétorique antiféministe," *Cahiers du Genre*, 1 (2012): 119-43.

62. Author, "Interview with Janine Hansen," Washington, D.C., September 16, 2017.

In their ideological framework, being a woman was always seen as a relational identity: they were someone's wife. Their link to men was especially important because it was also, paradoxically, the source of their vulnerability. In *The Power of the Positive Woman*, Phyllis Schlafly demonstrates this in discussing the necessity of curbing men's alleged casualness. She states that, "If he [the man] is deprived of this role, he tends to drop out of the family and revert to the primitive masculine role of hunter and fighter."<sup>63</sup> Men's reliability was, therefore, also an issue for this group of women, and their wariness showed the acuteness of their dependence. According to radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, they were in a state of inextricable subservience as they were convinced that marriage would insure the control of men's carelessness and violence:

Their desperation is quiet; they hide their bruises of body and heart; they dress carefully and have good manners [...] They use sex and babies to stay valuable because they need a home, food, clothing. They use the traditional intelligence of the female—animal, not human: they do what they have to survive.<sup>64</sup>

Respecting the patriarchal structures was, thus, an absolute necessity for traditional women since it guaranteed their economic survival.

On the other hand, other researchers identified attempts on the part of conservative women at circumventing or accommodating patriarchy. The respect of traditional gender roles could provide an invaluable level of protection against having to compete with men, who dominated society and the job market,<sup>65</sup> or else it could be resisted passively.<sup>66</sup> Political scientist Magali Della Sudda also recently raised the question of conservative women's practices in social movements and the subsequent impact of their activism on their situation.<sup>67</sup> In her study of Catholic women involved in right-wing groups at the beginning of the twentieth century, she describes the activists as "paradoxical citizens," caught between conservative discourse and innovative practices. However, if she identified emancipatory strategies, they always happened on an individual basis. Similarly, collective emancipation was never advocated for at Eagle Forum. Despite the occasional personal empowerment of some women, the collective interests at stake concern a class of individuals.

Conservative women's relation to their state of domination thus appears to be very complex: their empowerment opportunities, if any, were always deployed within the boundaries of gender norms. The women of Eagle Forum claimed a political voice while operating in restrained spaces and abiding by the rules, barely touching on the possibilities of female emancipation.

## 5 Conclusion

In line with their alleged natural attributes, men and women were assigned by the advocates of social conservatism to areas of actions called gender roles. Seen as social markers, they defined shared codes of behavior and organized a functional economic partnership beneficial to the couple from a class perspective. Under the leadership of Phyllis Schlafly, the women who were attached to this model and who rejected the emancipation advocated by the feminist movement from the 1960s onwards, set the preservation of their gendered interest within the family as their main goal. Their powerful identity of traditional women, although idealized and concretely used as a tool in activism, was also recognized as a source of weakness.

This socioeconomic and cultural battle guided by Phyllis Schlafly from the 1970s has helped conservative women to maintain traditional womanhood as a social ideal while legitimizing their intervention in the political sphere and reaffirming political engagement as a prerogative of conservative

63. Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman*, 96.

64. Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females* (London: The Women's Press, 1983), 69.

65. Jane S. DeHart, "Gender on the Right: Meanings Behind the Existential Scream," *Gender & History*, 3 (September 1991): 246-67.

66. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society*, 2 (September 1988): 274-90.

67. Magali Della Sudda, "Discours conservateurs, pratiques novatrices," *Sociétés et représentations*, 2 (2007): 211-31.

women. From their position as women, wives, and mothers, they made it a duty to work for the common good—although acting in reality in favor of their class. As long as they upheld the gendered status quo, they would be tolerated in politics.

This research therefore reveals how gender and power interact with social movement practices and discourse in the case of a female right-wing mobilization. As illustrated, conservative women's relation to female power was paradoxical. Deriving sociocultural authority from their subordinate position, as well as financial advantages, they attempted to preserve their influence, while gaining political ground as a countermovement. They ultimately managed to beat the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 and insured the survival of the "pro-family" discourse in American politics.

Contemporary figures have benefitted from this conservative fight and have taken up the torch, like Sarah Palin, Governor of Alaska, mother of five, and John McCain's running mate in 2008. She put forward a renewed vision of powerful motherhood through her use of the term "mama grizzly," which referred to women's fearless determination to defend their family and children.<sup>68</sup> Her rhetoric, which aimed at strengthening the value of women as activist mothers, may be one of the offshoots of Phyllis Schlafly's "pro-family" activism in the 1970s and 1980s.

---

68. See, for instance, the ad she ran in 2010 in support of conservative female candidates to Congress: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsUVL6ciK-c>.