

## Making a choice or taking a stand?

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DOI:

[10.1177/1464700116683657](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700116683657)

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Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Thwaites, R 2017, 'Making a choice or taking a stand? choice Feminism, political engagement, and the contemporary Feminist movement', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 55-68.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700116683657>

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checked for eligibility 10/1/19

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**Making a Choice or Taking a Stand?**  
**Choice Feminism, Political Engagement, and the Contemporary Feminist Movement**  
Rachel Thwaites

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**Abstract:** Choice feminism is a popular form of contemporary feminism, encouraging women to embrace the opportunities they have in life and to see the choices they make as justified and always politically acceptable. Though this kind of feminism appears at first glance to be tolerant and inspiring, its narratives also bring about a political stagnation as discussion, debate, and critical judgment of the actions of others are discouraged in the face of being deemed unsupportive and a ‘bad’ feminist. Choice feminism also encourages neoliberal values of individualism and consumerism, while downplaying the need for political and collective action against systematic inequalities. Yet to succeed in creating change for women debate needs to occur, and all decisions cannot be supported if they act to further inequality and a patriarchal status quo. In this article I would like to argue for the continued need to engage politically with other feminists and the status of the movement as a whole by critiquing choice feminism and looking empirically at how discussion and dissent can be silenced by the choice narrative. The empirical data in this article will focus on online discussions of naming on marriage to illustrate the wider theoretical argument.

**Keywords:** Accounting; choice feminism; contemporary feminism; naming; politics

The popular (non-academic), positive image of feminism is of a movement which protests for more choice for women in their daily lives: more opportunities, more freedom; less restraint and less constricted roles to play. This is an image that could be associated with any ‘wave’ of feminism, but has perhaps become most connected with the ‘third wave’, beginning in the 1990s. In this popular idea and narrative of feminism ‘choice’ is the most significant word. Women can *choose* to work or stay at home, choose to marry or not, have children or not; choices are to be made freely as the world becomes a more equal place. This kind of feminism sounds inspiring, welcoming, and positive. Claire Snyder has argued that Third Wave Feminism, from which choice feminism grew, is intended to be more inclusive and diverse (2008: 180). This is in part to deal with some of the perceived problems of the second-wave in dealing with the complexities of the category ‘woman’; this wave has rejected ‘grand narratives’ and looks to personal perspective and locatedness (Snyder, 2008: 175). However, as liberatory and tolerant as choice feminism initially sounds it has drawbacks which get to the heart of the question of what feminism is for (Thornton, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. These drawbacks are highlighted by feminists who critique the narratives of choice feminism. Indeed, some have been critical of the genuine inclusiveness of Third Wave feminism (Springer, 2002), casting doubt upon the idea that the choice narrative allows everyone to follow their own desires and wishes within the modern feminist movement.

The question of what to do with one’s last name on marriage has long been associated with the Western feminist movement. In the United States, Lucy Stone was the first American woman known to have retained her birth name after marriage. She was a nineteenth-century abolitionist and suffragist and her act has sparked the ‘Lucy Stone League’, which continues to campaign for neutral naming practices in the United States. Definite, documentary connections to the British

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<sup>1</sup> As Thornton argues in her 2010 article, when looking at the context of ‘an incident involving the representation of women’s breasts on the cover of an Australian law school student magazine, which included short articles on sexed crime’, de-politicising feminist activity and using ‘irony’ and ‘humour’ as excuses to objectify women, under the guise of third wave feminism, empowerment, and choice, can have detrimental effects for people’s understanding of what feminism’s aims are and actually for the position of women within that context.

Women's Movement are harder to find, yet despite this, the connection with the second wave of feminism is strong in the popular imagination: the decision to retain one's last name after marriage is therefore seen as, it least potentially, a feminist act. The practice of name changing has been connected by feminists with a patriarchal culture which views women as second-class citizens. The naming practice in the UK has grown from diverse practices across the four nations which make up the country to converge with the long-standing English practice of women changing their names to those of their husbands when they marry (Thwaites, 2013a). This practice in England was connected with *coverture*, a legal state women entered after marriage in which they were 'under' their husband's protection and were not separate individuals. Carol Pateman has described this as the woman being 'civilly dead' (1988: 119), unable to make contracts, hold (most kinds of) property, or testify against her husband in court as they were seen as one and the same. Though there were exceptions, (see, for example, Finn, 1996) the idea that husbands and wives were one in law, with the man as the more important of the pair, was signified through the shared last name. This tradition and its connotations, as well as lived consequences for real lives, are what feminists have reacted against, viewing the retaining of one's name as an act against the patriarchal culture. Hence, name retaining could be seen as an expected or 'standard' feminist act.

In this article I examine choice feminism and how it influences discussions of decision-making in women's lives through a set of empirical evidence taken from a small study of feminist bridal websites. This will focus on the discussions around name changing and retaining on marriage and how 'choice' becomes a part of maintaining the neoliberal status quo. As academic feminists debate the narrative of choice and its negative and anti-equality connections to neoliberalism, popular feminism continues to chart a course of celebrating and using choice as a means to live a feminist life. The divide between these feminist narratives needs to be bridged to have a more open discussion about what feminism means and how choice fits into it: without this we run the risk of seeing it become increasingly difficult to make political statements for women and becoming something which does not translate across academic and popular lines. In this article I engage with academic critiques of choice feminism, before looking at the set of empirical data and discussing what this means for how contemporary feminism is understood by those defining as feminist, and finally why choice feminism needs to be challenged if the movement is to remain politically engaged and useful to creating change.

## Critiquing Choice

Choice feminism is often associated with authors like Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000), who understand every decision a woman makes as potentially feminist, if given thought and made with a political consciousness. Authors such as Natasha Walter have also written highly popular books, based on choice feminism (Walter, 1999; though Walter has since distanced herself from this stance<sup>2</sup>, see Walter, 2010). It was Linda Hirshman (2006) who coined the phrase 'choice feminism' and gave it a pejorative slant, criticising the lack of political thought that went into these choices. In her typically polemical style Hirshman wrote that '[a] movement that stands for everything ultimately stands for nothing' (2006: 2). Michaela Ferguson is another strong opponent of choice feminism, arguing that judgement is needed to truly live a feminist politics and that all choices are not equal (Ferguson, 2010: 251). She argues clearly that judgements may be difficult to make – especially judgements of the lives of loved ones – but that this does not mean they should not be made (Ferguson, 2010: 249). She argues instead that the

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<sup>2</sup> Natasha Walter writes in her 2010 book, *Living Dolls*, that she feels she was over-confident about the gains women had made in *The New Feminism*. She writes that she failed to understand how pervasive and detrimental the sexualisation and objectification of girls and women really was and that it has only increased and intensified over the 2000s.

only way to genuinely improve our world is to make these judgements and to not allow fears of upsetting or alienating people to prevent us from actively engaging in politics in the everyday: ‘if we suspend judgement in the context of our personal relationships, we seem to be failing in courage as feminists – for feminism is precisely about reimagining and reworking the personal’ (Ferguson, 2010: 249). It is this point about judgement which is so critical to discussions of choice feminism and its worth. When we allow every choice to be equal there is no capacity to argue against one form of action and decision-making over another.

Choice feminism certainly opens up a number of critical questions around whether feminism’s main focus should be on the individual and their decisions or on the collective and the best decisions for all. Jannet Kirkpatrick states (2010: 242) that choice feminists are interested in getting away from the negative judgement of feminism and in remembering that only each individual woman can really know her own circumstances and reasons for acting as she does. There can be no ‘standard feminist’ actions, but only individual choices based on what is best for that person and her life; the worst thing a feminist could do is restrain her fellows in making these choices (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 242). For choice feminists, Kirkpatrick argues (2010: 243) feminism is always here, and the movement’s gains are simply part of the fabric of life. Instead of seeing feminism as an ongoing battle with the possibility of regression and the restriction of rights and hard won freedoms, choice feminists see it as ‘in the water’ (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 242). Hirschmann has claimed that this harms the feminist movement itself and those holding this viewpoint should be taken to task (see Hirschmann, 2006). Lori Marso also points out that having diverse desires is a part of politics and debate is key to maintaining a political stance (Marso, 2010: 263). The fact then, that people have different viewpoints, desires, and challenges in their life does not mean the demise of the movement: ‘we can retain feminist community while also retaining diversity’ (Marso, 2010: 264). Embracing the fact there are differences between women and that intersections create difference, does not also mean that all commonalities are washed away or that women cannot work to understand one another’s situations and work together through these differences. As Susan Friedman argues (1993: 250), we have to make political statements about ‘women’ to make any political progress and we can do this without pretending there is a united sisterhood. There have always been different and competing desires within feminism, as within most political movements<sup>3</sup>. Being a woman does set up socially constructed ways of relating to the world and the world relating to you (Marso, 2010: 266). It is recognising these and speaking across commonalities which women can do. Instead of falling on an individualistic choice rhetoric, which removes the chance to debate, critique, and *do* politics, we can work together through challenge, discussion, and considered judgement.

This academic feminist criticism of the feminist choice narrative suggests a divide between popular conceptions of feminism and academic ones. The danger of not bridging the gap between these discussions will become clear below. I am not suggesting non-academic feminists are unable to think without academic feminists – or indeed that non-academic feminists never turn to and use popular narratives themselves - but that there is a strong choice rhetoric in popular feminism, which helps to make living a feminist life-politics easier in a complex world (one which academic feminists will also turn to and use); however, this also allows feminists to refuse to take responsibility for difficult judgements, in Ferguson’s terms, and it is this which is critiqued by academic feminists. Choice within feminism is a very difficult concept to reconcile with the wider emancipatory, communal project and I am not providing a definitive answer to it here. However, there are more or less traditional choices which impact on unequally gendered relations and are linked to patriarchal pasts and futures. Instead of justifying these choices and

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<sup>3</sup> I see this as a sign of vibrancy and passion, responding to complex concerns.

silencing any critique of them, feminists should be prepared to discuss and critique the context within which they make their life decisions. Of course feminists will make a variety of choices about their lives, and not always in the best interests of women as a whole or the wider feminist movement, but the reality of this fact should not be hidden away behind the word 'choice'. Instead, feminists have a responsibility to look carefully at their own and others' decisions and the reasons for which they made them; in so doing, feminists will be able to critically examine and debate what it means to be feminist and what courses of action are better for women as a whole than others. It is important to take responsibility for one's actions, but equally significant to interrogate and challenge the structural and institutional factors which contribute to them, instead of allowing an unhelpful individualism to take hold. This will ensure feminism is not a movement of individual blame, but a collective force for change.

### **Details of the Study: methodology and analysis**

The wider study which this data was situated within looked at what British women do with their last names when they marry, and their sense of identity in connection with this decision. I administered an online survey, which 102 women completed, and conducted 16 in-depth interviews to capture participant experiences of name changing or retaining, their narratives of self, and their thoughts and feelings around the norm of name changing more generally, as well as how their name connected with family, sexuality, feminism, ideas of tradition, and love (please see Thwaites, 2013b for more on the wider study). In this article I focus on a smaller section of work I did within my wider study: looking at the articles and following comment discussions on feminist bride websites in relation to name changing. Though this was not the main focus of my study and hence a small selection of feminist bride websites were examined, the discussions which occurred on these platforms are indicative of wider popular feminist discussions of choice and bring useful insight through use of the words of women themselves. These websites are spaces which are accepted by users to be populated by feminists and so allow people to openly discuss their feminist life politics without too much fear of rejection or ridicule; they can truthfully share their life decisions and the complexities of coming to them. This makes them a good source of information on how women relate to feminism in their everyday life.

The websites I surveyed were *The Feminist Bride* ([www.TheFeministBride.com](http://www.TheFeministBride.com)), which was set up in 2011, *Feminist Wedding* ([www.feministwedding.com](http://www.feministwedding.com)), which was set up in 2009, and *A Practical Wedding* ([www.APracticalWedding.com](http://www.APracticalWedding.com)), which was set up in 2008 (I also looked at *Feminist Bride* ([www.feministbride.com](http://www.feministbride.com)) and *The Offbeat Bride* ([www.offbeatbride.com](http://www.offbeatbride.com)) for background reading, but my comments come from the first three websites). *The Feminist Bride* describes itself as a source for 'modern brides' to investigate 'substantive questions' around weddings and wedding traditions, to enjoy their wedding but feel it is a space of equality. The editor is Katrina Majkut, who used to work in investments before moving towards writing, via industry analysis of the wedding industry; she describes herself as a 'proud feminist'. It has a magazine style but offers lectures on wedding traditions and information on rights on marriage. The editor/author believes there are certain wedding traditions not worth following (name changing is one of them), but she wants the space to be for debate. *Feminist Wedding* is run by Casey and is a blog of her thoughts on weddings. She provides little information about herself, but follows a number of feminist blogs and has given her blog the tagline 'tradition disrupted. A feminist perspective on weddings'. Her blog revisits naming a few times, describing some of the pitfalls of doing so, such as losing track of people, and is generally highly negative about the practice. *A Practical Wedding* is a website for 'modern wedding planning' and allows anyone to submit posts – moderated and discussed with editors – about wedding planning. The website is not specifically about feminist weddings but includes posts on breaking with tradition and how to have a more

‘modern’ wedding, which can include references to more equal weddings. Judging by the entries which are specifically feminist and the comments, this website does attract women who define as feminist as at least part of its readership. None of these websites provide any explicit definition of feminism.

As these websites are openly public no ethical approval was sought to use the words of the women, however I will synthesise opinions given in comments rather than single people out, except for the authors of articles who would appear to have given their consent to their words being used in the public domain by presenting their words and videos alongside their name, in a similar way to new journalists. I searched these websites for articles relating to names and decisions about them when marrying, looking specifically at what a feminist community was saying about this decision. Through reading these articles and studying the comments and discussion which followed I was able to draw out recurring themes. The most significant theme of all was that of choice and how it should be a woman’s free decision what she does with her name; some added caveats, such as having carefully thought about the decision beforehand and in this way echoed the writings of Baumgardner and Richards (2000), which will be discussed in more detail below.

The women writing on these websites attempt to question the norms of marriage and the amount of money involved in the wedding industry, but there are conflicting and conflicted discussions of whether or not a feminist can change her name. Meg Keene, writing for [www.APracticalWedding.com](http://www.APracticalWedding.com), offers up the viewpoint that a name can be changed to a husband’s after a period of thought and when that decision feels ‘right’ to the woman (Keene, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2012). She argues that any decision can be a feminist one if enough time is given to considering it, rather than acting unthinkingly. Keene reasons that sharing a name builds a sense of being a team or unit<sup>4</sup>. Keene’s argument aligns very closely in this sense with Baumgardner and Richards (2000) about what being a choice feminist means. The thinking that could be done and its connection with feminism is rather less clear though: is Keene thinking about the historical and contemporary meanings of name changing, about the aesthetics of her name, or the thoughts and feelings of family, friends, and society? Each of these areas of thought I have suggested have gendered norms of action which can lead one to act in a particular way; no decision is completely freely made. The underlying position in this article and the following discussion in the comments section, which is very much in favour of Keene’s philosophy, is that any choice should be supported as only the woman can really understand her circumstances. The thinking that is done can be of any kind, as long as it occurs. The *thinking* is the feminist act: yet what this thinking really ‘looks’ like or how one justifies a decision that upholds unequal gender relations (see author) is not explicated. The thinking that is mentioned begins to look more like a lack of thought about one’s decision in terms of the feminist movement and women in general and more about individual needs and desires. And when following a norm can make life easier – which name changing certainly can (see author) – it is understandable that that norm might be followed. However, saying this is a feminist act is far more difficult to accept.

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<sup>4</sup> In this way she reflects many of the women who changed their name in my wider study, who wished to be obviously a unit, team, or family. Though not discussed in detail on these sites – the correctness of the decision itself rather than the reasons for the decision being the main topic of debate – women in my wider study who changed names gave a number of reasons for doing so, which are given here to provide some context: display of love and commitment to the marriage, a sense of adulthood achieved through marriage and the status of being a ‘wife’, and being obviously and intelligibly a family by sharing a name with one’s husband, but also importantly one’s children (see Thwaites 2013a and 2013b for more on the reasons women gave for changing names).

More unusually, [www.TheFeministBride.com](http://www.TheFeministBride.com) has an entry by Katrina Majkut which advocates *not* changing names on marriage (Majkut, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2012). She argues that there are historical and political reasons not to follow this pattern. The discussions which follow this entry are initially in favour of Majkut's philosophy, but quickly turn to disagreement by stating that all choices should be upheld. The choice narrative becomes the dominant one in this comment thread and anyone suggesting that choice is not an acceptable answer to the question of name changing would have found it very difficult to be heard. By suggesting that not upholding every woman's decision, even if that decision follows a traditionally unequal path, is to suggest you are not supportive of your fellow feminists and are therefore not a 'good' feminist. The choice narrative actually shuts down politically engaged debate and different viewpoints by encouraging everyone to act as they wish to and providing a justification with which is extremely hard to argue. On each of these three websites it becomes clear that there is no obvious answer for feminists as to what to do for the best for themselves as individuals, as well as for women more widely – there is no agreement over the real significance of names - and in this situation – not wanting to blame a woman for her choices or suggest she is not a proper feminist – the individualised narrative of choice becomes incredibly significant. When it is most difficult to decide 'what to do for the best', choice can appear to reconcile this difficulty with a notion of feminist politics: despite its actual de-politicising effect.

On *Feminist Wedding* visitors are asked to fill in a short quiz about name changing created by the site editors in response to the debates sparked off by the question of what to do with one's name on marriage. The results show that most women who answered felt there was considerable pressure on women to change names, that they were irritated that it is seen as only a woman's problem to grapple with, and that they were in the main going to keep their own name, but that they expected backlash for this decision. The question which caused trouble was whether women who change names are making an anti-feminist choice. Despite clear thoughts on the other questions with an easy majority one way, 30 percent of the women thought it was an anti-feminist choice, 47 percent thought not and the remainder were unsure (results examined on the 28<sup>th</sup> January 2013). The comments on the websites reveal an equally mixed viewpoint on this question. One [www.TheFeministBride.com](http://www.TheFeministBride.com) author found some support for her viewpoint in the comment discussion that women should not change names, but the idea of choice as more important than following a specific 'standard feminist' route quickly crept into the discussion of her article and became the dominant standpoint for those commenting. A [www.ThePracticalWedding.com](http://www.ThePracticalWedding.com) article has a long comments section following it in which feminists argue this point, showing how controversial the issue can be. Ultimately though, most agree that feminism is about offering women choice and all decisions should be supported. The feminist websites, helping women make decisions about living a feminist life-politics, ultimately come to the conclusion that choice feminism is the only way to deal with some of the incredible complexities which arise in living as a feminist in a non-feminist world. Naming decisions are one example of this choice feminism, but it is an example of how judgement and debate over individual actions which actually impact other women's decisions and selfhoods are silenced in the face of choice and individualism.

### **Standards of Feminism: what does being a feminist mean?**

The silencing of other thoughts and opinions, reducing everything to uncritical 'choice', forces debate away from politics and into the realm of 'unthinkingness' (Shils, 1971, as everyone must follow the choice majority. In fact, to not follow this majority is to be laid open to accusations of not being a 'good' feminist as one is not supporting women. The complexity surrounding

what it means to be a feminist comes to the fore in these discussions, with naming choices a clear case of confusion over definition and lack of comfort in judging others, even when faced with the reality that a 'choice' may be detrimental to the woman herself. Naming decisions are particularly open to choice feminist rhetoric. To expound a complex argument to a loved one about their own name can feel like too much, that there are other, bigger battles, and that this is too intimate a decision to bring politics into. It is also very difficult to discuss the patriarchal basis of name changing, which still exists in subtler forms than in previous centuries (see author), when most women changed their name. For feminists in particular this discussion is tricky: feminists are meant to understand the patriarchal basis of these kinds of traditions and hence to fight against them, so when a feminist friend changes her name any explanation other than free choice can be too difficult to face. However, feminists find themselves complicit in non-feminist and anti-feminist decision-making at times – we are all embedded within our society and have desires to follow and find satisfaction in the norms which make people understandable and acceptable within that society.

The name change is perhaps so particularly difficult and controversial a decision for feminists to make because of the association with feminism that keeping a name has. Certain actions and beliefs are associated with feminism (Western feminism in this case, as the naming issue was important to British and American feminism particularly) and being critical of marriage, aware of the historical subjugation of women, and retaining one's name are a part of this association. This has been discussed briefly above but can be seen in my own research (see author) and in other smaller studies into feminists and naming decisions (see Mills, 2003). A vocabulary of what it means to be a feminist today is created and name retaining can be seen as a 'standard' move. In fact, in my research, the only time women who changed their name had to explicitly justify themselves to others was when they had to justify themselves to their feminist community (see author). The difficulty that arises from having to articulate one's seemingly non-feminist action within the context of a feminist community compels many women towards choice feminism, both to justify themselves and to help make more comfortable those they see having to justify themselves. Justification depends on context, but choice feminism provides an easy route away from this uncomfortable moment and provides women with a sense of empowerment and agency in all their decision-making.

The words 'I made my own choice' are, after all, very hard to argue with. It also shifts the possibility of being a 'bad' feminist onto those who are more inclined to debate, and judgement of other choices becomes 'nagging', 'judgmental', and not supportive of one's fellow feminists: in short, being labelled with words and phrases most feminists try to avoid as part of the clichéd, negative picture of feminism. Choice is a strongly disciplining narrative (Thornton, 2010: 96); it encourages one in fact to make specific decisions and side with specific ways of being a feminist in order to remain open to everyone's desires and actions, even if those may in fact seem detrimental to women as a wider grouping or even to just that woman herself. Choice is therefore not as free as it initially sounds: choice feminism was just about women determining their lives it would be unproblematic, but the academic critiques of this part of the movement are compelling. Making women more comfortable removes the need to interrogate deeply the motives behind following a traditional path connected with patriarchy; it also aligns feminism with neoliberalism and consumerism in a way which should make us all wary, and puts critique and judgement firmly into the 'bad feminist' box. It is important that academic and popular feminism inform one another and that there are not barriers to communicating critiques of the movement; it is only by doing so that we can move forward in our goal of creating political change. Popular and academic feminism should not be separate entities but parts of a wider whole, yet the critiques of choice which academics debate are not represented on the websites



studied, suggesting something of a gap between the two narratives. To unite popular and academic feminism choice feminism must be loudly challenged.

### **Challenging Choice Feminism**

Choice is an important idea in discussions of late modernity and individualisation. Anthony Giddens' idea of the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1996: 5) suggests that there are now more choices and options available to people than ever before; life trajectories are not bounded as they once were by traditions and rigid rule structures. However this argument appears simplistic when thinking about how significant the past remains to decision-making and possibilities for action. Individualisation theorists pit the past against the present (see Bauman, 2011; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010; Giddens, 1996): the past is presented as stable and unchanging, whereas the present is in constant flux. This reductionist view of the past is in part, Vanessa May argues (2011: 365), because the past is viewed through its structures, whereas the present is viewed via personal lives: structures then easily appear unchanging, while our personal lives appear to be moving fluidly. However, separating structures and personal life paints an unrealistic picture of the world, as structure and personal life – or society and self – are 'interdependent and permeable, each affected by the other' (May, 2011: 365-366). The past then, as Matthew Adams argues (2003: 227), influences us all through its 'codes of practice': structures and norms influencing personal life.

Such 'codes of practice' become traditions and guide the decisions we make. Traditions can become so embedded that they are 'unthought' and become so taken-for-granted that they need little or no justification for being followed. The choice narrative ignores the very important place of unthinkingness within norms and traditions and that some seemingly freely made decisions are so influenced by societal practice and opinion that they cannot be considered truly free, in Giddens' sense. As Steven Lukes argues, some powerful social norms may be so ingrained that conceiving of other possibilities for action is practically impossible (2005: 113). Choices remain limited by the past, by resources, by the society in which a person lives, including the influences of the gender order and the ethical and moral standards of the day. The idea that women should be able to do whatever they want and makes them happy is a part of this narrative of reflexive choice; it is also a part of the pervasive neoliberal rhetoric which is so significant to modern capitalist societies. Though neoliberalism, globalisation, and the impacts these systems have on the world are frequently presented by politicians and the mainstream media as inevitable forces – unstoppable in their linear progression – they are actually the consequences of human decisions and policies (Heron, 2008: 95). These decisions have created vast inequalities but, as Taitu Heron argues (2008: 95), the 'role of international and political economic structures and interests as co-determinants to poverty and continuing inequality is not recognized'. Instead of investing in social equality and welfare, states look to solve problems through the market – and inequalities widen.

The idea that we can improve our lives through consuming is an important force within neoliberal capitalism. The consumer makes choices based on the idea of the consumer's *right* to choose (Craven, 2007). The consumer should be given a full range of choices and decide which is best for them. Yet our choices are bounded, as I have argued. Unthinkingness prevents certain thoughts or decisions for different courses of action from even arising. A person may look as if they have made a totally free choice when in fact the powerful cultural norms at work can prevent 'an agent or agents' desires, purposes or interests [...] [from being fulfilled] or even from being formulated' (Lukes, 2005: 113). Particular courses of action which are viewed as worthy or valuable and can even confer a certain status will shape action, encouraging people to

follow the norm to make their lives intelligible to others and viewed societally as valuable. Changing a name is one such norm, which is rarely questioned. The unequal nature of this naming practice – women being expected to change names in a way men are not – continues to be deeply embedded in conceptions of the self and maintenance of inequalities between men and women. It is incredibly difficult not to follow these norms, but when they perpetuate gendered inequalities feminists must take the time to interrogate them rather than finding ways of justifying them.

Upholding all women's decisions may seem like a feminist action in not belittling or talking down to other women, but it remains that feminists should be critical of the taken for granted norms which are unequally gendered and alert to the wider patriarchal context in which all decision-making is taken. Choices are not entirely free, but the rhetoric of their being so is clearly highly important and influences societies across the globe. Feminism has been involved with using the rhetoric of choice to attempt to improve the position of women. Christa Craven points out that feminists called women making decisions about their reproductive rights 'consumers' to attempt to get away from the generally paternalistic relationship with male doctors that women entered into on becoming pregnant: the female patient versus the male doctor (Craven, 2007: 701-702). However liberating this narrative was intended to be, the use of 'choice' by feminists within a neoliberal capitalist society must be constantly critiqued. This neoliberal rhetoric of 'choice' is often invested in maintaining the status quo by removing the agency of the less powerful and enhancing that of the established powerful elite (Heron, 2008: 95) who actually have the resources and means to make a wider range of choices than those who are disadvantaged. The less powerful are then blamed by this rhetoric for not taking responsibility for themselves to make their lives better and more prosperous.

This last point highlights the more dangerous side of individualism which creeps into these discussions, and which feminism can anchor itself to when critical discussion takes a back seat to embracing every decision. Though the idea of everyone choosing to follow their own desires and achieve their own goals sounds freeing, it is, as Marso argues (2010: 264) an argument which ignores how choices and actions impact upon other people. As she writes, '[f]or feminism to retain its political vision as a force for social justice, we must continue the difficult conversations concerning how acting on our diverse desires impacts the lives of others' (Marso, 2010: 264). This negative individualism also encourages us as a feminist community to forget the differences in access to resources which are available to us, and which influence our ability to make choices. Furthermore it encourages us to blame ourselves as individuals when things go wrong rather than look critically at social norms and structures, and purports that any choice made freely by the individual cannot harm them, hence being unhappy or undermined by your choice can only be your own problem. These are worrying statements to make in connection with feminism, a movement which should recognise systematic inequalities and work towards an equal society. Criticality is central to ensuring these important aims do not get lost in a narrative of neoliberal 'choice'.

The power of the imagination is significant to thinking critically and opening up other possibilities: again, what courses of action we follow are in part influenced by whether or not we can even imagine them (Lukes, 2005: 113). Michel De Certeau argues that 'the *thinkable* [...] is identified with what one can *do*' (1988: 190. Emphases in original). In other words, if we can think it we believe we can do it. Contrary to this, if we cannot think it we cannot do it – it takes being able to imagine an action first before it becomes a reality. The unthinkingness that sometimes surrounds decision-making and the justifications we provide for those decisions should not go by accepted, but should be a challenge to all feminists to challenge themselves and others to be more creative and imaginative in their thinking. Name changing is the prevalent

norm; name retaining is not so well articulated and with fewer examples and bureaucracy often discouraging it (see author), it can be harder to imagine as a possibility which is genuinely workable. In seeing beyond the traditional and imagining a better and more equal society we open up the possibilities for action and change. Unthinkingness is not feminist and this is something for us all to bear in mind.

## Conclusions

Naming discussions reflect the growing importance of the choice narrative in feminism and the anxiety around what it means to be a feminist and how much and what kinds of judgement are acceptable. Though there may be ‘standard feminist’ actions, such as keeping one’s birth name, judging others for following this particular path is unacceptable and evidence of ‘bad feminist’ practice by not supporting the decisions made by your fellow feminists. Choice feminism strives to be inclusive, tolerant, and accepting. However, and as scholarly feminist critique recognises, this narrative does a disservice to the feminist movement as a whole. By forgoing discussion, debate, and measured judgement we shy away from engaging politically and critically with the unequally gendered world in which we live. This is to shy away from the purpose of feminist action: to create change in our personal-political lives and those of other women. By accepting all paths using the narrative of choice we effectively support patriarchal relations and norms. It is difficult to judge others at times – and to turn a hard eye on our own selves – but without this kind of critique the movement becomes everything and nothing. Starting with the seemingly personal decision of name changing and looking carefully at its political, historical, and gendered aspects is one such decision to question and critique.

Academic and popular feminism need to speak to one another and inform one another to ensure critical conceptions of choice become more generally recognised. Choice feminism aligns itself with some dangerous and anti-feminist ideology, often completely without intention. Neoliberalism and individualism, as discussed in this article, discourage systematic change for better equality and silence discussion of how an individual fits within this system. By claiming choice as the most significant feminist narrative, feminists claim this silencing, individualism, and market consumerism. These are uncomfortable bedfellows for a movement dedicated to structural change, equality, and the opening of space for usually minority voices to speak. Significant to these discussions are unthinkingness and its opposite, imagination. Avoiding uncritical unthinkingness around decision-making and justification will challenge us as a movement to be more creative and imaginative about what feminism is and can do. The status quo maintaining choice feminism will no longer seem appealing if we open up our imaginations to what the world could look like if we critique, make political judgements, debate, discuss, and genuinely engage in the politics of making a better world.

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