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# The Binds That Tie

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## **Disciplines**

Communication | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Organizational  
Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

# I

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## The Binds That Tie

**I**N 1631, in *Cautio Criminalis*, Julius Friedrich Spee identified one no-win situation in which prosecutors placed women accused of witchcraft. The suspected witch was submerged in a pond. If she drowned, she deserved to; if she didn't, she was a witch. In the first case, God was revealing her nature; in the second, the devil. Under torture, women either did or did not admit to complicity with Satan. If they did, they were executed for their crime. If they didn't, their silence was attributed to solidarity with Satan and they too were marched off to the stake.<sup>1</sup>

Although he didn't know it, Spee had identified a trap set for women throughout history. When our foremothers overstepped prescribed boundaries, they confronted situations constructed to ensure that they were guilty until proven guilty.

More often than not, the accused was vulnerable because she was unprotected by a father, husband, or son and had increased her susceptibility to suspicion by asserting her right to influence other women. These "witches" were likely to be older, unmarried, childless women who practiced healing, transmitted advice about contraception, or used speech in socially disapproved ways.

Unprotected by men and outside a woman's "natural" sphere, these women were presumed susceptible to the wiles of Satan. It was with him that they coupled at night. In his name, they slaughtered infants and tormented townspeople. Once suspected of witchcraft, a woman was propelled into the no-win situations described by Spee. Viewing the inevitable penalty attached to public speech and private healing, women were enjoined to stay where, the argument went, nature and nature's God required.

Three and a half centuries later, the penalties are disdain and financial loss, not death, and the sanctions social, not theological, but it can still be hazardous for a woman to venture out of her "proper sphere." Some advocates say that female military personnel, for example, do not report sexual harassment for fear of being tagged lesbians and, under the ban on gays in the military, driven from the service. Alternatively, they will submit to unwanted heterosexual activity simply to establish that they are not gay. Their behavior is circumscribed in more subtle ways as well. "You have to project an image that is feminine enough that you won't be called a dyke," reports a former female captain in the air defense artillery who was investigated and "cleared" of the charge of being a lesbian, "but not so feminine that you won't be taken seriously."<sup>2</sup>

Nor does a woman have to venture so far into what were once all-male preserves. Businesswomen and mothers, Democrats and Republicans, young and older—a broad spectrum of contemporary women describe themselves as caught in situations in which they too are damned if they do and damned if they don't. "I had learned from more than a decade of political life that I was going to be criticized no matter what I did," wrote former First Lady Rosalyn Carter in her autobiography, "so I might as well be criticized for something I wanted to do. If I had spent all day 'pouring tea,' I would have been criticized for that too."<sup>3</sup>

"I don't think I was as bad, or as extreme in my power or my weakness, as I was depicted—especially during the first year, when people thought I was overly concerned with trivialities, and the final year, when some of the same people were convinced I was running the show," wrote Nancy Reagan in her autobiography a decade later.<sup>4</sup>

Dilemmas like these burden youngsters as well as adults. As an adult, Barbara McClintock would win the Nobel Prize for identifying the "jumping" genes on corn. As a child, she played catcher on her block's baseball team. Embarrassed by having a girl in such a position, the boys on the team refused to let her play in an important game but the opposing team welcomed her on its side. "On the way home," reports a biographer, "her neighborhood buddies accused her of being a traitor. 'So you couldn't win,' Barbara realized, concluding reasonably enough that 'you had to be alone. You couldn't be in a society you didn't belong to. You were only tolerated by the boys . . . I knew I couldn't win—and that's a dreadful feeling as a child.'"<sup>5</sup>

The history of Western culture is riddled with evidence of traps for women that have forcefully curtailed their options. This is not to say that, in some circumstances, men haven't been ensnared by such constructs. Masculinity has its own constellation of double binds, including the assumption that decisiveness and competence are masculine traits, so that a man considered effeminate is open to questions about his ability. At the other end of the spectrum, drafting men but not women for military service constitutes a double standard, with men subjected to all the risks and women escaping them simply because they are women. Indeed, psy-

chologist Gregory Bateson, who formulated the concept of the double bind in an examination of schizophrenia, assumed that it was primarily mothers deploying double binds who induced schizophrenia in their sons.<sup>6</sup>

These facts aside, the double bind is a strategy perennially used by those with power against those without. The overwhelming evidence shows that, historically, women are usually the quarry.

Binds draw their power from their capacity to simplify complexity. Faced with a complicated situation or behavior, the human tendency is to split apart and dichotomize its elements. So we contrast good and bad, strong and weak, for and against, true and false, and in so doing assume that a person can't be both at once—or somewhere in between. Such distinctions are often useful. But when this tendency drives us to see life's options or the choices available to women as polarities and irreconcilable opposites, those differences become troublesome.

Business theorist Rosabeth Moss Kantor calls them "self-defeating traps."<sup>7</sup> Author Joseph Heller termed them Catch-22s. Twentieth-century psychologists label them *double binds*. The notion has become a catchphrase to describe the dilemmas confronting contemporary women and is a commonplace in feminist scholarship. "This double yardstick of gender appropriateness and managerial effectiveness often leaves women in an unbreakable, untenable double bind," writes Nancy Nichols in the July–August 1993 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. "Women who attempt to fit themselves into a managerial role by acting like men . . . are forced to behave in a sexually dissonant way. They risk being characterized as 'too aggressive,' or worse, just plain 'bitchy.' Yet women who act like ladies, speaking indirectly and showing concern for others, risk being seen as 'ineffective.'"<sup>8</sup>

"Women were again in a double bind," writes Jane Ussher in *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?*, "for the association of femininity with sexual innocence and purity or conversely, with insatiable lust, could be used to categorize women as mad. Thus the rigid image of 'woman' or 'femininity' could be used to punish, to convict, to control—women out of control were clearly sexual and dangerous, and mad."<sup>9</sup>

Even a sense of humor "catches women in a double bind," observes American Studies scholar Nancy Walker. "While they are not supposed to be creators of humor, inasmuch as this role would ascribe to them power and intellectual qualities denied them by the majority culture, they are supposed to applaud the humor of that majority culture and, above all, not take themselves too seriously."<sup>10</sup>

Others describe the dilemma without attaching "double bind" to it. "In my experience as a trial attorney," writes Carrie Menkel-Meadow, "I observed that some women had difficulty with the 'macho' ethic of the courtroom battle. Even those who did successfully adapt to the male model often confronted a dilemma because women were less likely to be perceived as behaving properly when engaged in strong adversarial conduct. It is important to be 'strong' in the courtroom according to the stereotypic

conception of appropriate trial behavior. The woman who conforms to the female stereotype by being 'soft' or 'weak' is a bad trial lawyer; but if a woman is 'tough' or 'strong' in the courtroom, she is seen as acting inappropriately for a woman."<sup>11</sup>

Double binds are frequently involved in descriptions of women's speech. "In 1972, to be a woman in politics was almost a masochistic experience, a series of setbacks without a lot of rewards," writes Senator Barbara Boxer. "If I was strong in my expression of the issues, I was strident; if I expressed any emotion as I spoke about the environment or the problems of the mentally ill, I was soft; if I spoke about economics I had to be perfect, and then I ran the risk of being 'too much like a man.'"<sup>12</sup>

Catch-22 is a synonym for double bind. "Mothers are caught in a perfect Catch-22," writes psychologist Paula Caplan. "They are supposed to be concerned with emotions and closeness in relationships, but because autonomy has been designated by the white male middle class in North America as the pinnacle of emotional health, both mothers and those offspring who remain close to them are treated as immature or even sick."<sup>13</sup>

Progress that women have made in the profession "will not ensure that more women or minorities will study or stay in science," writes Marguerite Holloway in *Scientific American*. "Many scientists describe the situation as a catch-22: more women will enter the field only when there are more women in it. And, they say, the only way out of the conundrum is to change society's attitudes toward women—and men."<sup>14</sup>

Attitudes aren't all that matter, however. Money talks too. "[M]oney is unlikely to flow into a campaign unless credentials are in place, along with a record of voter confidence expressed through successful elections," write Witt, Paget, and Matthews. "This catch-22 has been particularly maddening to women candidates: You need money to be credible, but you have to be credible to obtain money."<sup>15</sup>

The concept also has taken hold in the press. Here and elsewhere "double bind" along with its alternative expressions has become, in many instances, a protean concept and, as such, of limited use. At worst, it can hobble women who see double binds as indestructible, tensile constraints that will lash back just as women believe they have broken free of them.

My take on the history of women differs from that of those who argue that liberation for women is an endless war in which small battles are won only to be met with violent repression. In *Backlash*, Susan Faludi argues that gains for women have been subverted by a backlash engineered by those in power. As one reviewer noted, her case is "basically a conspiracy theory. . . . that a cabal of villains has been at work successfully intimidating a large class of victims: women."<sup>16</sup>

Except for its epilogue, pessimism pervades Faludi's text. "A backlash against women's rights is nothing new in American history," she writes in Chapter 3. "Indeed, it's a recurring phenomenon: It returns every time women begin to make headway toward equality, a seemingly inevitable

early frost to the culture's brief flowering of feminism."<sup>17</sup> She cites the feminist movement of the mid-nineteenth century launched at Seneca Falls. "By the end of the century, a cultural counteraction crushed women's appeals for justice. Women fell back before a barrage of warnings virtually identical to today's."<sup>18</sup> "The malaise and enervation that women are feeling today aren't induced by the speed of liberation," she asserts, "but by its stagnation. The feminist revolution has petered out, leaving so many women discouraged and paralyzed by the knowledge that, once again, the possibility for real progress has been foreclosed."<sup>19</sup>

Is this really the case? Is the history of women one of Sisyphean struggle against odds that remain constant and overwhelming? Not quite. Women's progress has been thwarted by double binds that, when surmounted, have in fact been replaced by other double binds, as I will show here. But as women have conquered the no-win situations confronting them, they have marshaled resources and refined aptitudes that have made them more and more capable of facing the next challenge, the next opportunity. At the same time, they have systematically exposed the fallacious constructs traditionally used against them, and changed and enlarged the frame through which women are viewed. Although the result is not a steady move toward equitable treatment of women, it is a world in which progress is certainly sufficient to justify optimism.<sup>20</sup>

Enthusiastic reviews of Faludi's book by women's rights advocates suggest that it did touch a chord. The concept of backlash has been percolating through the women's movement for quite a while. "[T]here is a real backlash against the quality and personhood of women—in America, as in Islam and the Vatican," wrote Betty Friedan in 1981.<sup>21</sup>

Faludi tapped into a widespread feeling that the Reagan-Bush administration's challenges to equal opportunity and abortion rights placed women's rights advocates under siege. "The backlash years drove us, or certainly drove me, into feeling embattled and needing to huddle together against the inhospitable forces out there," reports Naomi Wolf. "And this created a subculture within feminism. We have to end that."<sup>22</sup>

In Faludi's view, "Millions of individual women, each in her own way, spent the last decade kicking against the backlash barricades. But much of that effort proved futile."<sup>23</sup>

As women's rights in education illustrate, however, even in the Reagan years, setbacks weren't permanent. Take, for example, the evolution of Title IX, an important component of the Education Amendments of 1972. It outlawed sex discrimination in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools receiving federal funds. That victory was solidified in 1974 by the Women's Educational Equity Act, which authorized funds for research in this area. In 1979, the Court added teeth by holding that individuals could file private suits against institutions over enforcement of the law.<sup>24</sup>

In 1984, three years into the Reagan administration, the Supreme Court narrowed the mandate of Title IX significantly. In *Grove City College v.*

*Bell*,<sup>25</sup> it held that only those programs within an institution receiving federal funding—and not the institution as a whole—were bound by Title IX. So, since only the financial aid office was receiving federal aid at Grove City College, only its programs were subject to Title IX. But the rollback didn't hold. In 1985 the Civil Rights Restoration Bill was introduced. It passed in January 1988, while Reagan was still in office.

Faludi, however, finds little consolation in history. "This pattern of women's hopes raised only to be dashed is peculiar neither to American history nor to modern times," she says.<sup>26</sup> Yet at the close of the supposed backlash decade, women saw progress. In March 1992, 82% of the American women polled by CNN/Time reported that they "have more freedom than their mothers did." By 50% to 22% the same women also reported that they enjoyed life more than their mothers had.<sup>27</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that discrimination against women no longer exists in American society. Instead, my point is that even in the face of an administration unsympathetic to many of the goals of the women's movement, there was progress—slow and insufficient, but progress nonetheless. To deny it, and in fact to close our eyes to the evolution of the struggle for women's rights, invites despair. To perceive gains for women as inevitably thwarted by crippling backlashes is to take on ourselves the role of the permanently shackled.

The thesis of *Beyond the Double Bind* is a simple one. Historically, women have faced and transcended double binds. Until recently, however, as one was overcome, another, often a ghost of the one surmounted, took its place. Meanwhile, vestiges of the surmounted bind lingered in the language through which women were invited to view their new challenges. But, over centuries, the lessons learned in breaking the binds persevered as well. These lessons open options for women that are either closed or less accessible to men. By exercising these options, women deny others the power to define and as a result confine them in false options. Put simply, over time women have learned to turn potatoes into vichyssoise.

### *A Bundle of Binds*

The social binds that have undercut aspiring female scholars are illustrative. Women who sought to learn and teach faced a network of interlinked binds—binds that go farther back than those faced by Spee's witches in 1631. The New Testament's most often quoted statement about women demands silence, submission, and procreation. Indeed, it is reproduction that will enable a woman to expiate her personal guilt for the sin of Eve. "I am not giving permission for a woman to teach or tell a man what to do," says I Timothy 2:12–15. "A woman ought not to speak, because Adam was formed first and Eve afterwards, and it was not Adam who was led astray but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin. Nevertheless, she will be saved by childbearing."

Some theologians in fact argued that the first woman's abuse of the



power of speech and of teaching wholly accounted for the Fall. Since their maternal ancestor had misused her power of speech, argued some, Eve's daughters should be grateful that they retained the capacity to bear children. "The woman taught once, and ruined all," wrote St. John Chrysostom in 500 A.D. "On this account . . . let her not teach. But what is it to other women that she suffered this? It certainly concerns them; for the sex is weak and fickle, . . . [T]he whole female race transgressed . . . Let her not however grieve. God hath given her no small consolation, that of childbearing." Indeed, it is "by means of children" that women will be saved.<sup>28</sup>

Even as some theologies began to emphasize the "purity" of womanhood instead of woman's original sin, the bind remained in place. A loose tongue bespoke loose morals. Women who did not remain silent might be burned at the stake as witches or heretics under the fundamentalist impulse; in other times and places, the woman who would not be enjoined to silence was condemned as unwomanly. So in 1617 the pseudonymous Constantia Munda responded to a misogynistic diatribe by pointing out the trap it embodied:

[Y]ou surmised that, inveighing against poor illiterate women, we might fret and bite the lip at you, we might repine to see ourselves baited and tossed in a blanket, but never durst in open view of the vulgar either disclose your blasphemous and derogative slanders or maintain the untainted purity of our glorious sex. Nay, you'll put gags in our mouths and conjure us all to silence; you will first abuse us; then bind us to the peace. We must be tongue-tied, lest in starting up to find fault we prove ourselves guilty of those horrible accusations.<sup>29</sup>

Denied access to literacy and the learning that comes with schooling, women were condemned, as Munda pointed out, for their illiteracy, their inability to think profound thoughts or contribute to the great intellectual debates of their day. And since public speech was considered immodest, women were instructed that defending themselves or their work was unladylike. Those who did learn to read and write found that communicating their learning to others was difficult. Among other constraints, they were denied access to Latin, the language of scholarship. "If we be taught to read," wrote the pseudonymous Mary Tattlewell in 1640, "they then confine us within the compass of our Mother Tongue."<sup>30</sup>

As the pseudonymity of Munda and Tattlewell suggests, some female writers escaped strictures by hiding their identities. Adopting a *male* pseudonym was the best route to publication, but this strategy presented other problems. When women resorted to it, evidence needed to rebut the claim that women have produced no great scholars often disappeared with their deaths. And when a masculine pseudonym was unmasked, the woman writer was ridiculed and her sexuality questioned. Indeed, the use of masculine pseudonyms led, by the sometimes extraordinary mechanics of the double bind, to some strange assertions. "The notorious sexologist of Vienna, Otto Weininger, maintained in 1903 that all the great women of history (Queen Christina of Sweden, Catherine the Great of Russia, math-

ematician Sofia Kovalevskaia, artist Rosa Bonheur) had been either homosexual or bisexual. Why else would intellectual women (George Sand and George Eliot, for example) take masculine names?," he asked.<sup>31</sup>

In books, libraries, and classrooms, men preserved the knowledge they developed; meanwhile, women were expected to hide their learning and were denied access to the lectern. "Being a Woman [I] Cannot . . . Publicly . . . Preach, Teach, Declare or Explane [my works] by Words of Mouth, as most of the Famous Philosophers have done, who thereby made their Philosophical Opinions more Famous, than I fear Mine will ever be," wrote Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle in 1663.<sup>32</sup>

Women also were denied access to the professorships that facilitated dissemination of their ideas. So, for example, "[i]t took three attempts, four years, a German revolution, and the intercession of Albert Einstein to get [future Nobel Prize winner] Dr. Emmy Noether the most junior faculty position possible—without pay."<sup>33</sup>

Noether was told that she could not be a faculty member but could serve as a faculty assistant. "Thus, the 1916–1917 university catalog read, 'Mathematical-physical seminar. Theory of invariants: Prof. Hilbert, with the assistance of Fr. Dr. E. Noether, Mondays 4–6 p.m. free of charge.' She could not even earn the usual student lecture fees."<sup>34</sup>

Once women gained the power of the pen, they faced a set of assumptions that disparaged their actions and impugned their motives. The sanity of female authors was called into question, even as late as the nineteenth century. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf quotes the reaction of a young woman to a new work by a female author. "Sure the poor woman is a little distracted," observes the reader, "she could never be so ridiculous else as to venture at writing books, and in verse, too."<sup>35</sup>

### *Absorbing the Limits*

Some learned women accepted their exclusion as in their own best interest. For many, the price of authorship was anonymity. A noteworthy instance was eighteenth-century scientist Thiroux d'Arconville, an associate of Voltaire. Conditioned by centuries of strictures on public presentation by women, she believed that "intellectual women garner only ridicule; if their work is good, they are ignored; if it is bad, they are hissed at." As a consequence, she worked within the confines of her own home and veiled her science in a cloak of anonymity.<sup>36</sup> Things did not change much when the century turned. In 1811, the educator and playwright Madame de Genlis advised: "If a woman does write books, she should avoid all publicity; she should show a great respect for religion and austere morals; she should not respond to critics of her work for fear that in the response she might transgress feminine delicacy, modesty, and softness."<sup>37</sup> But in an academic world built on the notion that truth emerges in the clash of ideas, the author unwilling to defend her work damned it.

Indeed, the work of women particularly needed defending. Women who wrote learned prose or elegant poetry were dismissed as derivative or the by-product of creative happenstance. "If what I do prove well, it won't advance," wrote Anne Bradstreet in the 1650 edition of *The Tenth Muse*. "They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance."<sup>38</sup>

### *The Absence of a Legacy*

When women published under their own names, academic institutions did not usually perpetuate or their libraries preserve their work. As a result, great women scientists, philosophers, historians, and authors vanished from history. And without the traces of their lives and work, new generations of women could be subjected to the assumption that if women were capable of such intellectual activities, they would have produced the very forms of evidence that had been suppressed.

Generation after generation was expected to rediscover the wheel. "In the preface to Erxleben's 1742 defense of women's right to higher education, the medical doctor Christian Leporin noted that Anna von Schurman had published a book on the education of women in the previous century, but that 'despite all my efforts, it was not to be had.'" With Schurman's work misplaced by tradition, Dorothea Erxleben—Leporin's daughter—never had the opportunity to sharpen her young mind on Schurman's mature thought. Erxleben could not have known that the same fate would befall her own work. Some fifty years later, Amalia Holst noted that Erxleben's *Inquiry into the Causes Preventing the Female Sex from Studying* was "no longer available." Holst could not procure a copy, nor could Erxleben's stepson—a professor.<sup>39</sup>

The stolen legacy of our foremothers denied generation after generation the role models that testified to the possibility of female learning. Generation after generation assumed that it was the first to surmount the biases; as one generation succeeded, its legacy was lost to the next. Cumulatively, that vacuum made it possible for misogynists to reiterate their claim that women had not demonstrated a capacity for original thought because it was not in their nature to do so.

A similar collection of arguments was used to justify excluding work by women from the canon. Critics rationalized the omission, or what Joanna Russ terms "suppression," with a familiar litany:

She didn't write it.

She wrote it, but she shouldn't have.

She wrote it, but look what she wrote about.

She wrote it, but "she" isn't really an artist. . . .

She wrote it, but she wrote only one of it.

She wrote it, but it's only interesting/included in the canon for one, limited reason.

She wrote it but there are very few of her.<sup>40</sup>

The suppression of scholarly work by women was the product of a bind I call silence/shame. Other binds came into play in the education of women, among them the proposition that admitting women to the classroom would harm men.

When women entered the classroom in respectable numbers at the turn of the century, the guardians of the diplomas hypothesized that men would leave disciplines dominated by women; if that proved untrue, then the presence of women in the classroom would undercut men's education by distracting them. "Women, charged with sex repulsion and sex attraction, both of which interfered with the holy process of educating the future leaders (males) of the country, simply could not win," writes historian Barbara Miller Solomon.<sup>41</sup>

Admitting women into the masculine sanctums of higher education would dilute the manly virtues of the institution, if not of the country itself. So in 1925 *The Nation* parodied opponents of female admission to Columbia's School of Law. "If women were admitted to Columbia Law School, the faculty said, then the choicer, more manly and red-blooded graduates of our great universities would turn away from Columbia and rush off to the Harvard Law School!"<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, women persisted. They gained access to learning through the libraries of fathers, brothers, and husbands. They gained access to schooling by arguing, among other things, that to properly fulfill their roles as mothers and educate the next generation, they required the knowledge books and classrooms could provide.

By the time the Education Amendments of 1972 put Title IX on the books, a lot of ground had been covered. Armed with education and gaining increasing access to the public sphere, women had claimed the tools that tore down barriers against them, stripping bare the pseudo-sciences that snared them in double binds. So, for example, the work of female legal scholars framed the Supreme Court ruling that outlawed fetal protection policies in the workplace, and the testimony of a female psychology professor lay the ground for the Supreme Court's decision, in *Hopkins v. Price Waterhouse*, that promotional decisions may not be determined by imposing gender stereotypes on women in the workplace.

Moving from education and public speech into action, women fought for and finally won the right to vote. The ballot became another major weapon in the war against binds. When exercised in force, it could be used to threaten the political survival of those who opposed women's rights. It also had the potential to put women in positions of influence, ready to create social change, when the opportunity arose. So, for example, after Congressman Howard Smith in a move designed to scuttle the entire proposition, amended Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to include the word "sex," Congresswoman Martha Griffiths led the battle so that it stayed there. Once the legislation was passed, she policed the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to ensure that sex discrimination was taken seriously. Lindy Boggs did the same for equal credit protection.

And it was Congresswoman Patsy Mink who shepherded Title IX through the House in 1972. By barring discrimination in educational institutions that received federal support, Title IX opened graduate programs and tenure-track jobs once closed to women. I am of the generation that benefited—my first university job was created under the affirmative-action pressure induced by the impending passage of Title IX.

By persisting, women of past generations proved the truth of Sarah Grimke's observation in the nineteenth century that educational reformer Horace Mann would "not help the cause of women greatly, but his efforts to educate her will do a greater work than he anticipates. Prepare woman for duty and usefulness, and she will laugh at any boundaries man may set for her."<sup>43</sup>

### *The Construct of the Double Bind*

Grimke might not be surprised at women in the U.S. Congress or women justices of the Supreme Court, but neither would she fail to recognize the sorts of constraints women still face. They are the vestiges or ghosts of the same double binds that have confronted women throughout history.

As described by Gregory Bateson in the mid-1950s, double binds involve a powerful and a powerless individual, or, in the cases of interest to us, social and institutional norms and a vulnerable class—women. For Bateson and his associates, a double bind occurs if two or more persons, one of them the victim, undergo a repeated experience in which one "primary negative injunction" conflicts with a second, both "enforced by punishments or signals which threaten survival," and from which the victim has no means of escape.<sup>44</sup>

In her 1975 book *Language and Woman's Place*,<sup>45</sup> linguist Robin Lakoff applied Bateson's notion to society's requirements of women. "Now the command that society gives to the young of both sexes might be phrased something like: 'Gain respect by speaking like other members of your sex,'" writes Lakoff. "For the boy, as we have seen, that order, constraining as it is, is not paradoxical: if he speaks (and generally behaves) as men in his culture are supposed to, he generally gains people's respect. But whichever course the woman takes—to speak women's language or not to—she will not be respected. So she cannot carry out the order."

Bateson and his colleagues concluded that responses to a double bind include "helplessness, fear, exasperation, and rage."<sup>46</sup> They theorized that schizophrenia could be induced by repeatedly subjecting vulnerable individuals to double binds. Other scientists found that in so-called "normal individuals," double binds increase expressed anxiety as well.<sup>47</sup>

Rhetoric, as critic Kenneth Burke notes, is a reflection as well as a selection and a deflection. Rhetoric makes sense of otherwise inchoate experiences. It structures. It orders. It focuses. *It attempts to limit our angle of vision to that of the writer or speaker.* A double bind is a rhetorical construct that posits two and only two alternatives, one or both penalizing the

person being offered them. In the history of humans, such choices have been constructed to deny women access to power and, where individuals manage to slip past their constraints, to undermine their exercise of whatever power they achieve. The strategy defines something "fundamental" to women as incompatible with something the woman seeks—be it education, the ballot, or access to the workplace.

When a bind casts one alternative as loathsome, it points to the other as a woman's only appropriate choice. So, childbearing is expected to be chosen over intellectual pursuits, silence over shame, and invisibility over acknowledgment of aging. When both alternatives in the construct carry clear penalties, as equality and difference do when they are defined by male norms, the woman is encouraged to abandon whatever goal has aroused the equality or difference debate. Finally, when a bind casts two supposedly desirable states as mutually exclusive, the woman is invited to believe that she is incapable of attaining success.

The intended result is stalemate for those whose sex chromosomes are XX rather than XY. You might say that this book is a study of the binds that tie.

Double binds are constructions derived from theology, biology, and the law, and rhetoric's fashioning of each. In some cases, the external constraint is invariant. Men cannot bear children; women can. Men cannot breastfeed; women can. In other cases, the constraint is either hard and fast or fabricated, depending on one's belief system.

### *Theology*

For a fundamentalist, the story of Adam and Eve reflects the way it really was. The sin of Eve condemns women to childbearing; in the New Testament Paul bars them from preaching on that account. Many avowed Christians deny this construction as a simplistic and archaic view; other people treat the whole story of Eve and Eden as the conjuring of those wanting to justify an absolute patriarchy. For others, the scriptural text is absolute, and the dictates of religion are as constraining as the laws of gravitation and matter. They describe the natural order of life—sin against them and be damned. Only through silence, submission, and reproduction could women be redeemed. Since silence and motherhood were twinned, a corollary assumption was formed of the alliance: Public speech by a woman is the outward sign of suspect sexuality.

Biology, created by God, enforced this "natural order." Since women could bear and nurture infants, it followed that they must. Once a child is born, the assumption that the mother has primary responsibility for raising offspring kicks in. Nothing inherent in a woman's physiological makeup uniquely equips her for *childrearing*. The suggestion that childrearing is a woman's natural role is not a statement of natural law, but an assertion. Yet it was granted for millennia.

The scientific community of earlier centuries perpetrated the idea that

abandoning her natural sphere carried physiological penalties, among other punishments. "Female illnesses" were the outward signs of an unsubmitive soul "[T]he most significant cause of a woman's menopausal disease, virtually every [nineteenth-century] doctor believed, lay in her violation of the physiological and social laws dictated by her ovarian system," writes historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. "Education, attempts at birth control or abortion, undue sexual indulgence, a too fashionable life style, failure to devote herself fully to the needs of husband and children—even the advocacy of woman's suffrage—all might guarantee a disease-ridden menopause."<sup>48</sup>

Such assumptions prompted the infamous "rest cure" prescribed for female patients in the nineteenth century, and bedeviled the development of safe contraceptive drugs and devices.

### *The Law*

For women to venture beyond the confines of rearing children in the home would destroy the natural order of things and in fact subvert the state. So scientific advances toward safe means of birth control were met with legal constraints. Moreover, women who married literally disappeared under the law of coverture.

"By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law," wrote William Blackstone in 1765, "that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything."<sup>49</sup> Under the law of coverture, married women could not sue, sell, or contract without first getting their husband's permission. They were, in the eyes of the courts, represented in and through the man they had married.

"Now if a woman holding public office were to marry, two possibilities would follow," observed the German philosopher Johann Fichte in *The Science of Rights* (1798). "First, she might not subject herself to her husband in matters regarding her official duties which would be utterly against female dignity . . . secondly, she might subject herself utterly to her husband, as nature and morality require. But in that case she would cease to be the official and he would become it. The office would become his by marriage, like the rest of his wife's property and rights."

From the invariant facts of a woman's physiology—her ability to bear and nurse children—came a host of assumptions rooted in "nature and morality" that cast women in double binds. Codifying these assumptions were the powerful institutions of the church, the scientific community, and the state. Enmeshed as they were in theology, biology, and law, the binds were seemingly non-negotiable—until women began slipping the knots.

*Beyond the Double Bind* will identify five binds, their archaic origins, and the ways their vestiges continue to shape contemporary culture. These binds include the following constructs:

- Women can exercise their wombs or their brains, but not both.
- Women who speak out are immodest and will be shamed, while women who are silent will be ignored or dismissed.
- Women are subordinate whether they claim to be different from men or the same.
- Women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent, unfeminine.
- As men age, they gain wisdom and power; as women age, they wrinkle and become superfluous.

And, in a latter-day bind, women who succeed in politics and public life will be scrutinized under a different lens from that applied to successful men, and for longer periods of time.

At their base, these binds concern power and place. Across Western history a metaphor has emerged to express each. The first—who is in charge?—is expressed as a contest over who will wear the “breeches” and operates on the zero-sum notion that there is one pair of pants per couple. The second—place—is manifest in the claim that in their proper place, women nurture. That notion is often symbolized by the assumption that women should stay in the kitchen.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, the story of the Wife of Bath is about “the fight for the breeches.” Centuries later the question remained current. Asked who wears the pants in his family, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s spouse Denis responded, “I do, and I also wash and iron them.”<sup>50</sup>

The figurative enjoinder not to wear the pants in the family was incarnated in requirements that women in public wear appropriately “feminine” dress. Feminist activist Flo Kennedy recalls the era when women first began to wear slacks. “I can remember—I was still practicing law at the time—going to court in pants and the judge’s remarking that I wasn’t properly dressed, that the next time I came to court I should be dressed like a lawyer. He’s sitting there in a long black dress gathered at the yoke, and I said, ‘Judge, if you won’t talk about what I’m wearing, I won’t talk about what you’re wearing.’”<sup>51</sup>

Historically, the place for women is in the private sphere of the home—centered, metaphorically, not in the bedroom or the parlor, but in the nursery and the kitchen. “A man is in general better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table, than when his wife talks Greek,” observed Samuel Johnson in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>52</sup> Two centuries later, the spouse of the Democratic nominee for president, Hillary Clinton, was ensnared in a dispute over the meaning of her remark that she chose not to stay home and bake cookies and have teas. In such instances, food is taken as a symbol for home and home for “a woman’s proper place.”

Some activists stepped out of that noose by granting that a woman’s place is in the home, while enlarging our notion of what constitutes home. “Home is where the heart is, where your loved ones are,” argued Carry



Nation in her efforts to save men from the saloon. "If my son is in a drinking place, my place is there."<sup>53</sup>

The binds that constrain women's power and women's place are not, in fact, discrete. Their relationship is prismatic—one magnifies another. Each of the chapters on binds will trace the origins of the double bind, track the social sanctions put in place to preserve it, and chart the progress women have made in overcoming it—in the process drawing power and advantage from what were moves originally designed to disable. A final chapter will summarize the strategies available to surmount the residues of the binds that in the past have tied.

Underlying the binds are specific constructs: The no-choice-choice; the self-fulfilling prophecy; the no-win situation; the unrealizable expectation, and the double standard. Each circumscribes choice.

The no-choice-choice is the focus of Chapter 3, "Double Bind Number One: Womb/Brain." This bind casts the world as either/or, with one option set as desirable, the other loathsome—hence a no-choice-choice. Women could use their brains only at the expense of their uteruses; if they did, they risked their essential womanhood. Exercise of the uterus was associated with the private sphere, exercise of the brain with the public. Here was a question of a woman's proper place: Those who chose to exercise their intellects in public life upended the natural order, endangered the family, and called into question whether they were really women. Women broke the bind by gaining access to education and using the tools of scholarship to establish that childbearing does not destroy intellect, and vice versa, and then gaining access to forms of contraception and birth control that made reproductive choice and timing possible.

Once women ventured into public space, they confronted binds designed to deny them power and to undercut what power they could attain. In Chapter 2, I explore how Hillary Clinton was caught in a derivative of the womb/brain bind—the social assumption that someone who valued career must despise those who elect full-time homemaking. As the *New York Times* put it during the 1992 campaign, "She is a lightning rod for the mixed emotions we have about work and motherhood, dreams and accommodation, smart women and men's worlds." Scores of other media sources agree. "[T]he squirming over Hillary Clinton," said the *Los Angeles Times*, "isn't so much about a First Lady as about ambivalence over women, power, work and marriage." Clinton became a national test case, subjected in fact to *all* the binds traditionally deployed against women.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are the subject of Chapter 4, "Double Bind Number Two: Silence/Shame." Sociologist Robert K. Merton defined a self-fulfilling prophecy as "a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come *true*."<sup>54</sup> The silence or shame bind condemns women for failing to do something they are forbidden to do. So, for example, women were forbidden to speak and then condemned for failing to produce great oratory. The first condition becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of the second. The bind was overcome

by women who weathered the social sanctions imposed on women who spoke, in the process demonstrating a capacity to speak. Through the exercise of public speech they were able to access other resources such as the courts and the ballot.

No-win situations are the subject of Chapter 5, "Double Bind Number Three: Sameness/Difference." In the no-win situation, by winning, you lose. If the no-choice choice is "either-or," this bind is "neither-nor." In it, women are judged against a masculine standard, and by that standard they lose, whether they claim difference or similarity. The bind is broken by positing a form of equality not solely based on a male norm.

Unrealizable expectations are a corollary of the no-win situation. Treated in Chapter 6 addressing the bind of femininity/competence, unrealizable expectations are also designed to undercut women's exercise of power. By requiring both femininity and competence of women in the public sphere, and then defining femininity in a way that excludes competence, the bind creates unrealizable expectations. By this standard, women are bound to fail. The power of the bind is rooted in a woman's willingness to grant someone else the right both to *define* and *impose* the requirement of femininity. The presence of this bind has led those studying women and leadership to conclude that women "have to reconcile contradictory expectations to succeed, contradictions not imposed on men."<sup>55</sup>

Denying others the power to define appropriate behavior breaks the bind. Being feminine as femininity was traditionally defined may be incompatible with being competent, but being a woman is not. When that view was embraced by the Supreme Court, women's rights advocates gained important ground in their fight to alter persistent attitudes that did what the law once had done—keep women in their assigned place.

The *double standard* is a construct that reinforces the competence/femininity bind. Blossoming as women gain power, it functions by ensuring that they cannot successfully exercise it. Women's sexuality is treated differently, their actions judged differently, their competence tested differently and for a longer period. Our expectations of women are more difficult to meet. At the core of this bind is the assumption that woman is other and defective.

Chapter 7, "Double Bind Number Five: Aging/Invisibility," examines the double standard holding that as men age they acquire wisdom and power, while women gain wrinkles and hot flashes. In pervasive stereotypes about female aging, we see the residues of the womb/brain and femininity/competence binds as well. These binds are reinforced throughout the culture. Chapter 8, "Newsbinds," lays out examples from news.

The final chapter contrasts stories that presuppose backlash and those that assume bind-breaking and argues that it is the latter, not the former, that best capture the history of the struggle for women's rights. It also charts the ways and means now available to women and men bent on bind-breaking.

That struggle has not, once and for all, been won. Neither have many

other struggles over the rights of groups who have been history's victims, yet few would argue that we have not progressed since the days that the ballot was routinely denied to women as well as to African Americans and other minorities. The vestiges of ancient prejudice die hard, and the ways in which they are fought are matters of disagreement among those who fight them. The civil rights movement has included advocates of non-violence and Panthers, integrationists and isolationists. So the women's movement has found itself split into opposing camps more than once over time.

One problem with the backlash hypothesis is that it assumes that the movement has been a homogenous whole, moving steadily toward agreed-on goals. That view is not born out by history. Once suffrage was gained, for example, the movement split, with one flank advocating and the other opposing the Equal Rights Amendment. Feminist opponents of divorce reform laws in the early twentieth century turned into advocates,<sup>56</sup> and when an attained goal proved counterproductive—as did special protections in the workplace and different ages of sexual consent for men and women—advocates changed directions.

What can be construed as a backlash often was a serious disagreement among women's advocates about means and ends. When the Supreme Court faced the issue of a minimum wage for women in *Adkins v. Children's Hospital* in 1923, for example, some women's groups—including Alice Paul's National Women's party—favored the court's position, which ruled the law unconstitutional. Others supported what they saw as protection for women.<sup>57</sup> A similar divide separates those who favor and oppose bans on pornography.

Faludi's argument for backlash is, moreover, selective, and the resulting spin on events invites despair. A blue-collar female union member loses her job under conditions she considers discriminatory, sues, and loses. "Desperate for work to support her two children, King cleaned houses, then took a job as a waitress. She lost all her benefits. 'Today I cleaned the venetian blinds at work,' she says. 'I make \$2.01 an hour and that's it, top pay. It's demeaning, degrading. It makes you feel like you are not worthwhile.'"<sup>58</sup> Of note is the fact that the woman's case was decided at the District Court level not on grounds of sex discrimination but on a question of the applicability of OSHA regulations. The first opportunity that the Supreme Court—with three Reagan justices on it—had to hear a comparable case framed as sex discrimination, it held for the plaintiffs, 9-0.<sup>59</sup>

Although feminist historians lined up on both sides of the case, Faludi also treats the loss of the class-action suit by women presumably denied commission-sales positions at Sears as a major defeat for women. Ignored entirely is Ann Hopkins' vindication in 1989, at both the District and Supreme Court levels, in her suit against Price Waterhouse for sex discrimination.

Selectivity is at work in Faludi's economic claims as well. While women continue to earn less on average than men, such economic factors as part-

time work, time out of the labor force for childbearing and rearing, and a shorter work week account for some of that difference. So, for example, Census Bureau data indicate that in 1992 married women with preschoolers were less likely to work year-round and more likely to work part-time than mothers whose children were six years old or older.<sup>60</sup> And in key places, Faludi is simply wrong. The difference between the earnings of men and women, which Faludi says hasn't improved much since 1955,<sup>61</sup> in fact has changed. And change occurred during the supposed "backlash" decade that is Faludi's focus. In 1980, women earned 64 cents for every dollar earned by men; in 1990, that figure had jumped to 72 cents.<sup>62</sup> But more important is that in her presumed backlash decade of the 1980s, the gap narrowed more dramatically than it had in the 1960s or 1970s.

None of this is to suggest that the wage gap and other forms of discrimination do not persist and urgently require change. They do. My point is that even in the 1980s advocates won some major victories.

There have been periods in which the women's movement was largely quiescent, as it was from the early 1920s until the early 1960s. Other times are characterized by steady, ongoing activity, and with it progress. Beginning in the early 1970s, the Court has overturned laws that enshrined unequal access, unequal opportunity, and unequal obligations based on sex in estate administration,<sup>63</sup> as well as unequal access to fringe benefits in the military,<sup>64</sup> employment benefits,<sup>65</sup> and alimony.<sup>66</sup>

Viewed in broad perspective, progress has been clear, whether in the areas of employment rights, reproductive rights, rights to credit, or protections from sexual harassment and gender stereotyping. In denying such advances, and their cumulative effects, we risk seeing ourselves as perpetual victims.

Not all contradictions fit Bateson's definition of the double bind. Paradoxes pervade literary, philosophical, and theological discourse throughout the culture. Where they are not grounded in fallacies, they may be used to elicit higher levels of awareness. In some Eastern religions, for example, contradictions are the focus of meditation. The goal is to free the contemplative from the material world in which the contradictions seem to inhere. Even in physics, the idea that light is both a particle and a wave is seen as a paradox: As the question was framed by classical science, it had to be one or the other; it could not be both. The poet Pat Parker incorporates another contradiction, this one regarding human behavior, in her poem "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend": "The first thing you must do is to forget that i'm Black. Second, you must never forget i'm Black."<sup>67</sup> In all three cases, enlightenment results from paradox.

Alternatively, as Rosalyn Carter suggested in her autobiography and as other leaders such as Gloria Steinem have pointed out, recognition that you will be condemned no matter what you do can liberate a person to do whatever she wants.

The double bind is durable, but not indestructible. Examined as rhetorical frames, double binds can be understood, manipulated, dismantled. The

bind that crops up after one has been vanquished is often a pale ghost of the more vigorous form that preceded it. *Backlash* is a more insidious idea. Seen as an external and invariable constraint, it does real damage when women accept and *internalize* its assessment of social and political reality. "The most effective backlash against feminism almost always comes from within, as women either despair of achieving equality or retreat from its demands," writes Wendy Kaminer.<sup>68</sup> I agree. As a rhetorical construct, *backlash* can be as constraining a frame as the constructs that form double binds. The notion that moments of progress for women are met by an inevitable and inevitably successful backlash turns the political and social activity of women into Sisyphean gestures. *Backlash* invites women and their allies to give up.

A more inclusive view of the history of women shows them surmounting, sometimes one by one, a series of double binds whose roots are deeply embedded in the past. Women who unmasked one dilemma faced the next and challenged it, bumped into a third and pirouetted around it, confronted another, and denied it its power. In the process they enlarged the scope of science, changed laws, altered behaviors, and changed the political complexion of this country. If they do not disable themselves with the rhetoric of disempowerment and victimization, they will enter the twenty-first century able to stand, speak, dance, and redefine the world as the need arises.

BEYOND  
THE  
DOUBLE  
BIND

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Leadership*

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