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# The Unrelenting Reaction against American Women: How Backlash Has, and Continues to Negatively Affect American Women

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# The Unrelenting Reaction against American Women: How Backlash Has, and Continues to Negatively Affect American Women

## **Abstract**

Although the status and position of American women has greatly improved in the 20th century, women still face many societal setbacks and obstacles in experiencing treatment equal to men. With many social gains such as equal education and labor opportunities, along with reproductive rights, military and political inclusion, it would be expected that women would have shaken their title as 'minority' long ago. Yet as each gain was won through a fight, there always stood the opposition. While women have excelled further than before, women have and will continue to endure waves of opposition. American women face a rapidly growing backlash against the rights, privileges, and equalities they historically struggled to gain.

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**THE UNRELENTING REACTION AGAINST AMERICAN WOMEN**  
*HOW BACKLASH HAS, AND CONTINUES TO,*  
*NEGATIVELY AFFECT AMERICAN WOMEN*

By

Amy Dunayevich

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

With Honors in Criminology

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Thesis Project Description**

As American society progresses socially and economically, one cannot avoid recognizing that not all members within the society are benefiting from the progress. Often it is found to be that should a minority group in society advance with society, their gains are quickly shunned or even systematically taken away by society's majority. This phenomenon is established as The Backlash Effect. Coined by social psychologist Laurie A Rudman, The Backlash Effect impedes on not only the inflicted group, but also over time, society's progress as a whole.

In my thesis I examine how The Backlash Effect impacts American women through historical analysis, statistic proof, and evaluation of social, economic, and political trends. I also attempt to project the future for American women by assessing the current socio-political climate. I gather my information from lecture notes, contemporary internet and media publishing, and through library and database research in archives of journals within the discipline of sociology and women studies. I refer to documented research on the evident positions of American women in the workplace, in a university setting, reproductive rights gained or lost, family planning resources, and social positions as compared to their male counterparts. The thesis project is a 16-page intensive research paper. The text is primarily a sociological evaluation, with additional theories from the social psychological discipline.

## **Thesis**

Although the status and position of American women has greatly improved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women still face many societal setbacks and obstacles in experiencing treatment equal to men. With many social gains such as equal education and labor opportunities, along with reproductive rights, military and political inclusion, it would be expected that women would have shaken their title as ‘minority’ long ago. Yet as each gain was won through a fight, there always stood the opposition. While women have excelled further than before, women have and will continue to endure waves of opposition. American women face a rapidly growing backlash against the rights, privileges, and equalities they historically struggled to gain.

## **Examining The Backlash Effect**

The backlash effect, as coined by Laurie A. Rudman, is defined as social and economic sanctions for counter stereotypical behavior.<sup>1</sup> Often occurring as a negative reaction against something that has gained popularity, prominence, or influence<sup>2</sup>, the backlash effect has the potential to systematically harm the reacted-against members of society. The backlash effect often seems to appear as a separate, counter movement to that which it is against, thus gaining strong encouragement and support. Rudman and Fairchild (2004) explain that the backlash effect often functions as stereotype maintenance<sup>3</sup>; it reinforces the stereotypes an afflicted group may relentlessly be trying to shed.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudman and Fairchild (2004), p. 157

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Backlash>

<sup>3</sup> Rudman and Fairchild (2004), p. 157

Stereotypes act as means of categorization. Stereotypes also label and define a group of people and allow the perceiver to make justified assumptions and expectations of a member of the stereotyped group. When perceivers meet targets, the targets are likely to be categorized based on their physical features, and are subsequently defined by the fitting and socialized stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> Stereotypes of a perceiver's out-groups (and of their own in-group) are socialized beginning at an early age until internalized.<sup>5</sup>

Though sometimes the stereotypes can have a positive inclination (Asians are smart, Blacks dance well), most are negative, harmful, and oppressing. Social psychologists explain that there are two cognitive sources for stereotyping and the consequential prejudice that follows. First, stereotyping, along with excluding and discriminating against others, serves as a group-serving bias. By excluding and derogating others, members of the in-group feel superior and justified in their position. Second, stereotypes are used in concurrence with the "Just World" phenomena.<sup>6</sup> The "Just World" principle explains the idea that the world is just, fair, and that people receive what they deserve.<sup>7</sup> In believing the world is just, people are less likely to see the flaws and harm in stereotyping others, and see no necessity in improving conditions for those in need.

Women have always bore the brunt of enforced stereotypes. Virginia Valian explains that we invisibly cling to ideas about gender that harm women, within a set of implicit or unconscious hypotheses about sex differences, or *gender schemas*. These ideas play a central role in shaping men's and women's lives, and often both men and

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<sup>4</sup> Rudman and Fairchild (2004), p. 157

<sup>5</sup> Course Notes from Dr. Reiling (2005)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

women hold the same gender schemas through similar processes of socialization.<sup>8</sup> Gender norms and bounds are socialized in society, and women are expected to stay within these boundaries. Attempting to disprove a stereotype, or break through a social boundary, is often frowned upon, labeling the attempter as a deviant and thus discrediting their social validity. The labeled deviant [group] either chooses to reconfirm to the norms, or live with the negative label.<sup>9</sup> Such is the backlash against women attempting to breakthrough their set roles and stereotypes.

Women are prescribed to be communal, kind, thoughtful, and sensitive to others' feelings.<sup>10</sup> This expectation for a woman to always be "nice" assists in the subordination of women. Through socialized gender relations, a stable system of inequality is maintained through paternalism that stereotypes the lower status group as communal.<sup>11</sup> Women, as social subordinates to men, are stereotyped as "nicer." Because men depend on women (for sex, sexual reproduction, homemaking, and child care) it is in men's self-interest to ensure that women remain deferent, compliant, and willing to enact subordinate roles.<sup>12</sup> Just as white slave owners stereotyped their black slaves as cheerfully submissive, so too are women affably treated by men and stereotyped as nice.<sup>13</sup>

In the last century, attitudes towards women's roles and character traits have drastically changed. The "contemporary American women" was encouraged to be

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<sup>8</sup> Hornig (2003), p. 23

<sup>9</sup> Course Notes from Dr. Reiling (2005)

<sup>10</sup> Rudman and Glick (2001), p. 744

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

independent, ambitious, and competent<sup>14</sup>; no longer was a woman to be idle, unintelligent, and vacantly pleasant. However within the last twenty years these characteristics have been tweaked as result of social backlash. The agentic woman took on masculine-reserved characteristics such as being forceful, directive, and competitive,<sup>15</sup> exactly opposite of the traditional female. Women were now perceived as professionally threatening or were shunned for their successes. Women gained labels such as “ball-busters,” a clear indication (anatomically-speaking) of which gender viewed women as a threat. Social psychologists see this reaction from males as a result of The Realistic Conflict Theory, which states that society is in a constant struggle and competition for resources, such as sustenance, spouses, jobs, etc.<sup>16</sup> Because much of masculinity has been socialized as being a primary breadwinner, the feminist drive for economic equality threatened American manhood.<sup>17</sup> Men would not have their jobs and economic successes stolen by (or even shared with) women, and thus women began to be pushed back into their old roles as docile, uninspired housewives. Yet because of the social gains won through the many women’s movements of past decades, women fight to remain in their earned social positions and struggle between their personal goals and society’s ideologies. Now women are still encouraged to be self-assertive and competent, yet are heavily discouraged from advancing their interests at the expense of others or threaten the well-being of others<sup>18</sup>, “others” specifically implying men.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 745

<sup>15</sup> Rudman and Glick (2001), p. 745

<sup>16</sup> Course Notes from Dr. Reiling (2005)

<sup>17</sup> Matchett (1992)

<sup>18</sup> Rudman and Glick (2001), p. 745



## **Backlash Affects Women Professionally**

In her book, Backlash, Susan Faludi described the 1980's as a decade in which women lost ground in the workplace, the government and in the right to reproductive choice.<sup>19</sup> Because of the 1980's backlash, strongly influenced by the extremely right-wing, conservative Reagan administration, the rights women had so diligently worked for began to slip away from them. On their way towards gaining equality, women began to be systematically made uncomfortable in the workforce, and were blockaded from gaining influential leadership positions. Even within the new gains women won, such as inclusion in the military and the improvements of domestic abuse and rape laws, women were still encouraged to refer to traditional female stereotypes and were stonewalled when attempting to improve their positions.

### *Labor*

The traditionally enforced career for women was strictly as the homemaker. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the 1950's, women's successes were measured in their careers as housewives. A good housewife was a prized possession of the American man. Children, along with a kept home, were the credentials of a woman's domestic labors. The women's movements of the 1960's brought upon a change in women's roles. Women tried to break through their domestic stereotypes and demanded the right to be included and respected within the workforce. Today, women are just as common in the labor force as they were at home and though that is an improvement, working women continue to face many setbacks.

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<sup>19</sup> Matchett (1992)

Figuratively, the United States appears to be approaching gender equality in the workforce. According the 2001 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women have entered the paid labor force in large numbers and now constituted 47% of workers.<sup>20</sup> In 1972, as women steadily began to enter the workforce, only 18% of managers were female, compared to 45% of managerial and administrative positions held by women in 2001. In education, women possess 56% of awarded bachelor's degrees according to the U.S. Department of Education, 2001.<sup>21</sup> Women also possess 45% of the advanced degrees that have been awarded and currently earn 42% of PhD's and 43% of professional degrees (law or medicine).<sup>22</sup>

Yet with these statistics in mind, though women are active, women are still not equal in the workforce. Evaluating the median weekly earnings of men and women in all professions reveals that women are making an averaged \$140 less median weekly earning than their male counterparts.<sup>23</sup> According to *Business Week*, 24 percent of U.S. workers are making poverty wages with few or no benefits and 58 percent of those workers are women.<sup>24</sup> In addition to these statistics, women have a hard time finding their place once within the workplace. Faced with threats of discrimination and discrediting, women are continuously struggling to remain optimistic as they strive for labor equality.

Carli states that literature on gender effects on social influence reports that males exert greater influence over others than females do.<sup>25</sup> Carli argues it occurs for two

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<sup>20</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 630

<sup>21</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 630

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics official website

<sup>24</sup> Flanders (2004)

<sup>25</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 632

reasons. First, females are perceived as less credible influence agents because of their presumed incompetence. Second when women are considered to be as competent as men, they are often seen as violating perspective gender role norms that stress the importance of communality in women.<sup>26</sup> A study conducted by Rudman and Glick (2001) about hiring discrimination support Carli's claim, explaining that women face a lot of pressure to be both agentic and communal. The results showed that agentic male job applicants were considered more socially skilled than agentic female applicants. Agentic men were also considered more hireable than agentic females for positions that required both agentic and communal skills. Yet women who possessed both agentic and communal qualities were considered to be as hireable as their male counterparts.<sup>27</sup> Women who seem too competent, savvy, assertive, and self-motivating are viewed as not friendly enough and labeled too aggressive. Backlashing against women who try to break out of the expected communal quality to a more agentic quality, most companies and businesses shield away from hiring women who don't seem as friendly as women *should* be. However men who have these qualities are considered assertive, great team members and leaders, and are welcomed with open arms. At the same time, women should not display overly communal or weak qualities either; if a woman seems too nice she is assumed incompetent and unable to handle work situations that require a level of resourcefulness that "nice" girls don't have. So while women are encouraged to join the labor force, they are discouraged of becoming like the men of the labor force, and are forced to find a balance between traditional feminine characteristics and respected masculine attributes. Men have yet

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<sup>26</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 633

<sup>27</sup> Rudman and Glick (2001)

to face pressures of becoming more caring, sympathetic to others, and “nicer” to gain their positions in the business world.

Even after attaining their positions, women are still devalued as credible employees. Madeline E. Heilman explains that social biases against women consequently devalue the work of female managers.<sup>28</sup> When the value of the work is impossible to ignore, people often attribute the success to external factors rather than the female manager’s competence. Furthermore, when external attribution cannot be found, people dislike and reject successful female managers.<sup>29</sup> This holds true not only with female managers, but also with female co-workers, who often have to struggle to find their validity within the traditional boy’s club of the workplace. Once proving her competence, the woman could experience a backlash from her male counterparts who resent and discredit her successes as over-stepping her female boundaries.

Women are often systemically oppressed within the workplace. In a study examining the influence of gender differences over women professors’ equal treatment at research institutes, the findings revealed that male professors had greater access and priority in receiving research funding, and were awarded significantly greater monetary allocations than women.<sup>30</sup> In the 24-year evaluation, women researchers were less likely to have their scholarship funded by industrial sources, or by federal sources. Shauman and Xie assume the disparity is a result of the under representation of women in the natural sciences and engineering arenas, as research in these fields

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<sup>28</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 632

<sup>29</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 632

<sup>30</sup> Shauman and Xie (2003), as from Hornig (2004), p. 193

are heavily funded, especially by industry. In 1993, women were 40 percent less likely to receive funding from the federal government than men were. Women were also less likely to have access to a research assistance that could greater facilitate the research and publication process. In 1969 female post-secondary faculty were 70 percent less likely than their male colleagues to have a research assistant. By 1988 women were only 10 percent less likely than men, and though this change exhibits improvement, this figure has remained consistent since that year.<sup>31</sup>

### *Leadership*

Though statistics show women are now equally awarded education degrees and are catching up to men in receiving professional and advanced degrees, the distribution of men and women in elite leadership positions proves gender inequality is still prevalent. As former President Clinton noted, the tops of managerial and governmental hierarchies do not “look like America.”<sup>32</sup> “In Fortune 500 companies, women constitute only 4% of the top officers, 3% of the most highly paid officers, and 0.4% of CEOs.”<sup>33</sup> In U.S. politics, only 13% of senators, 14% of congressional representatives, and 10% of state governors are women.<sup>34</sup> 30% of lawyers are women, yet women only make up 15% of law firm partners, and 5% of managing partners in large firms.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Shauman and Xie (2003), as from Hornig (2004), p. 193

<sup>32</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 630

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Center for the American Woman and Politics (2001), as from Carli and Eagly

<sup>35</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 631

The lack of women holding powerful positions has often been explained as the “pipeline problem.” The Pipeline Problem explains that the lack of hiring a member of a specific group of people is a result of the excuse that there is just no available qualified members,<sup>36</sup> which often is false. An example is the claim that women with the appropriate education and qualifications were just not available to fill these high-powered positions; that none were to be found. The explanation remains popular among male CEOs, Its plausibility has been eroded by the increase in women’s employment as managers.<sup>37</sup> When research universities began to open their doors to women faculty, the universities appeared to be providing equal access to women. However, for many years, these same research universities justified the low numbers of women by pointing to the lack of available pools of qualified women. Yet the numbers proved this false, as on average 43% of masters and professional students and 40% of doctoral students are women.<sup>38</sup> The statistics also show that women are more available and qualified than they have ever been. Therefore the pipeline explanation is truly fraudulent.

Women also face what the *Wall Street Journal* introduced as “The Glass Ceiling.” The Glass Ceiling has been acknowledged as an invisible but powerful barrier that allows women to advance only to a certain level.<sup>39</sup> The glass ceiling is coequal to prejudice and discrimination against women. The glass ceiling affects women on a

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<sup>36</sup> Course Notes from Dr. Reiling (2005)

<sup>37</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 631

<sup>38</sup> Hollenshead (2003), as from Hornig (2004), p. 214

<sup>39</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 630

grand scale as it interferes with potential female leaders gaining authority to influence the abolishment of these discriminatory practices.<sup>40</sup>

These practices of pipeline justification and the glass ceiling continue to hold back women with leadership potential. Just like gaining entry to the labor force, women struggle with excelling towards leadership positions as the same stereotypes are applied; men are competent while women are less credible.

### *Military Leadership*

Leadership in the military is also blocked for women. In the 1970's many U.S. military programs extended their admission policies to include women, such as enabling women to be appointed to the Navy, Army, and Air Force academies in 1976.<sup>41</sup> However, integration has been slow. Only 14% of the total military force is female, and only 2% of the officers are female at the level of brigadier general and rear admiral or higher.<sup>42</sup> The study conducted by Boldry, Wood, and Kashy (2001), evaluated the gender biases against women in a military setting. Their findings revealed that both male and female cadets considered men to have more confidence and were better at decision making, thus had greater leadership ability, while women had more character, like integrity and selflessness. These perceptions are congruent to general, traditional gender stereotypes. However, a cadet's success in the corps was best predicted by their perceived leadership ability, not character, and since male

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 631

<sup>41</sup> Boldry, Wood, and Kashy (2001), p. 689

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

cadets were perceived to have more leadership than females, men would more likely be chosen for positions of leadership.<sup>43</sup>

One reason for the consequential negative perceptions of women is the lower evaluations women may be receiving from their colleagues and supervisors. The sex difference in performance evaluation reflects discrimination, as when both sexes engage in equivalent leadership behavior, women are still devalued when leadership roles require a masculine leadership style and when evaluators are predominantly male.<sup>44</sup> Women admit to feeling as if they are perceived as weak and discredited in the military. According to a survey of the 1991 graduating class at West Point, only 15% of female cadets felt totally accepted by their classmates.<sup>45</sup> If women could take on the more masculine model of leadership ability, while still maintaining their 'character' perhaps women could break through to leadership positions. However women are traditionally and stereotypically not masculine and would be shunned if they tried to be. Because as the backlash effect reveals, when a group attempts to shed a stereotype they can be greatly rejected by the group who's ranks feel threatened by the hopeful group's efforts.

### **Modern Backlash**

Not since the Reagan administration has there been as strong of a Right Wing conservative head of government as there is today with President George W. Bush's

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<sup>43</sup> Carli and Eagly (2001), p. 632

<sup>44</sup> Boldry, Wood, and Kashy (2001), p. 691

<sup>45</sup> Ibid



administration in office. This government has been feverishly working to return to conservative and traditional roles in the United States, with a strong focus on women. Many conservative groups, in support of the current administration, have developed with hopes for a stronger right wing and conservative America.

Groups such as the Eagle Forum have more influence on the government and voters than do statistical facts. According to Eagleforum.org, they are a pro-family movement that stands for “honoring the institution of marriage and the role of the fulltime homemaker” and “defeating the misnamed Equal Rights Amendment with its hidden agenda of tax-funded abortions and same-sex marriages.” Priding themselves as “the alternative to women’s liberation<sup>46</sup>,” the Eagle Forum is a backlash against modern women by conservative women. Holding rallies such as “REAL Women’s Voices,” the Eagle Forum attempts to discredit and oppress women with opposing or more progressive views. The Eagle Forum is also responsible for conjuring up legislation like 1981's omnibus Family Protection Act that sought to eliminate federal support for equality in education and legal aid for women seeking divorce. They also proposed repealing the Equal Pay Act, censoring birth control information before marriage and banning abortion.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to development of conservative groups, there has also been a growth in following of a Christian-sect religious group, the Evangelists. One famous and influential practicing Evangelist is President George W. Bush. Evangelists are conservative in their views, stressing growth and prosperity and look to the 1950’s as the “good old days” when family values were still intact and women’s place was in the home.

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<sup>46</sup> Flanders (2004)

<sup>47</sup> Flanders (2004)

While the 1950's may have been a prosperous time for America, it was a time in which women were excluded from opportunities for success. After World War II when soldiers returned home, the government granted them the GI Bill, which paid for their educations and assisted the men in finding work. While the men were prospering in their education and careers, women were not accepted to or forced to leave universities so to make more eligible spots for the veteran men.<sup>48</sup> Women were to stay home and tend to the family and children, while the man was to be the breadwinner. These ideologies of family values are what Evangelists claim feminism and female modernity has destroyed.<sup>49</sup>

While Bush's administration is in office, women face many challenges of holding on to the rights they had struggled to gain earlier in the century. Bush's administration claims to be "pro-family" using this angle in their attempt to overturn the historic Roe V. Wade Supreme Court decision that made laws against abortion a constitutional violation of women's personal rights.<sup>50</sup> In 1992 the Supreme Court reopened the Roe V. Wade case and reaffirmed their decision. Bush is now attempting to once again reexamine Roe V. Wade but this time with more conservative legislators and Supreme Court officials. Women may in fact lose their right to the choice they fought to deserve.

While Bush may claim to be pro-family and even pro-women, his administration has cut funding for many programs that greatly assists women and families. Though women are making \$ .75 to every man's dollar, the Bush administration abolished the government's Equal Pay Matters Initiative and removed fact sheets about equal pay from federal government Web sites.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the "pro-family" administration has

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<sup>48</sup> Hornig (2004), p. 4

<sup>49</sup> Matchett (1992)

<sup>50</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roe\\_V.\\_Wade](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roe_V._Wade)

<sup>51</sup> Flanders (2004)

proposed cuts to funding the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which assists mothers in childcare.<sup>52</sup> It is easy to see the direction the government is moving in is one which is not helping women over all, and if anything, is pushing women backwards in social evolution.

Backlash author Faludi explains that many forces, such as media, pop sociologists and psychologists' eagerness for publicity, Hollywood's sensationalizing, and the fashion industry's need for innovation, fueled this modern backlash against women.<sup>53</sup> The media would exclaim flimsy and misleading statistics that would invoke false conclusions, such a methodologically flawed but widely-headlined "study" reporting that single women at 30 had only 20% chance of marrying with their chances falling rapidly thereafter. The corrections and withdrawal of this flawed study were buried in the back pages of newspapers.<sup>54</sup> Women are forced to read the messages the backlash sends; women cannot have it all, working women are damaging themselves and their families, and single women must marry or live lives of lonely and embittered solitude.<sup>55</sup> There is little to no encouragement for women to try to break out of this mold, thus the stereotype trap is fallen into again.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Matchett (1992)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Matchett (1992)

As society continues to disallow women to excel, women end up taking one step forward- two steps backward. Though once the direction women seemed to be going in seemed promising, today the future of American women seems bleak. Society has successfully used backlash to put women back in the place society wants them to be- subservient and powerless. Today, the backlash is in adaptation to the modern woman, who with her gained rights must struggle to maintain and not lose what little she has. With little to no advances in the rights for women in the labor force since the 1970's, women find themselves trapped between their right to work and the restrictions against professional growth. The new right wing keeps threatening women of taking away not only their reproductive rights, but also their rights as American citizens, under the pretense of morality and conservatism.

The backlash effect has always come into play when it seemed that women have overstepped their traditionally established boundaries and though these boundaries have since been expanded, women are still trapped within as long as the self-interest of the opposing group (males, government) is first in line. Today, in some aspects women are better off than before, but alternately may very well be on the cusp of losing all that women of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have fought for as result of the modernized and growing backlash of today's American society.

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