

Feminist Choice

Brandy—a college senior—was accepted to a prestigious law school but is no longer sure that she should attend. While she has been interested in a legal career since high school, she is now more interested in starting a family. She and her fiancé, James, will be married this summer. They are both interested in trying to have children right away. Not only does Brandy doubt her ability to excel in law school while also being a new mother, she and James think that it would be better if one of them could be a stay-at-home parent—at least while their children are young. She is looking forward to life as a mother and often likes the idea of being a homemaker.

When discussing her dilemma with her best friend, Wynona, she was surprised at how strongly her friend reacted. From Wynona’s perspective, not only would Brandy be throwing away a huge opportunity, she would also be wasting her talents. This seems especially wasteful, given how much work Brandy put into school, internships, and studying for the LSAT. Moreover, Wynona almost feels like this would be a betrayal to generations of feminists who fought to expand opportunities for women. Giving up a potentially lucrative professional career to start a family plays into the still all-too-common idea that a woman’s place is in the home. Instead, Wynona argues, by becoming an influential female professional, Brandy could be a valuable role model for young women—including, potentially, her own daughter or daughters. While Wynona wants Brandy to have the family that Brandy has always wanted, she doesn’t want Brandy to lose her professional aspirations in the process. Like many other women, she can have both. If Brandy and James are certain that one of them should put their career on hold to be a stay-at-home parent, why shouldn’t it be him?

Brandy doesn’t think things are so clear cut. For instance, she thinks that it makes more sense for her to choose being a homemaker than it would for James to choose this—this path simply resonates with her a lot more than it resonates with him. Additionally, Brandy thinks, different people have different strengths and inclinations. She would probably be a better and more engaged caregiver than James would. Moreover, she doesn’t think that this choice would make her less of a feminist. If being a feminist is about expanding women’s options, why shouldn’t being a homemaker be one possibility among others, if that’s what she is interested in doing? In fact, she thinks, criticizing someone for choosing to be a homemaker over being a lawyer is itself anti-feminist. Domestic and caregiving work is genuinely important and valuable work, she thinks, but this work is often devalued and marginalized—in large part because of its longstanding association with women, especially working class and minority women.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What values are at stake in this debate, and what criteria should be used to decide between the two positions?
2. How, if at all, would the values at stake in this debate differ if it were a man (such as James) deciding whether to pursue a career or to be a stay-at-home parent and homemaker?
3. Is the decision about what career path to pursue a purely personal decision? Or do we have responsibilities to other people when making such decisions? When it comes to this decision, who else (if anyone) does Brandy have a responsibility to in this case, and what (if anything) is the nature of that responsibility?

