

Linda R. Hirshman, Who Challenged Stay-at-Home Mothers, Dies at 79

A feminist provocateur, she went on to write about the gay rights movement and transformative figures like the first two female Supreme Court justices.



Linda Hirshman found herself smack in the middle of the mommy wars in 2005, when she decried the trend of highly educated women leaving the work force to be stay-at-home mothers. Credit...Nina Subin

By [Penelope Green](#)

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Linda R. Hirshman, a union lawyer turned law and philosophy professor turned feminist provocateur, author and cultural historian who managed, to her delight, to enrage liberals and conservatives alike with an attack on so-called choice feminism, died on Oct. 31 in Burlington, Vt. She was 79.

Her daughter, Sarah Shapiro, said the cause was cancer.

Ms. Hirshman found herself smack in the middle of the mommy wars in late 2005, when she published [an article in The American Prospect](#), the progressive policy journal. She had become alarmed by statistics showing that women were dropping out of the work force in large numbers to raise their children.

She viewed the opt-out phenomenon, as it was often described, as a failure of feminism, which — more than four decades after [Betty Friedan](#) decried housework in “The

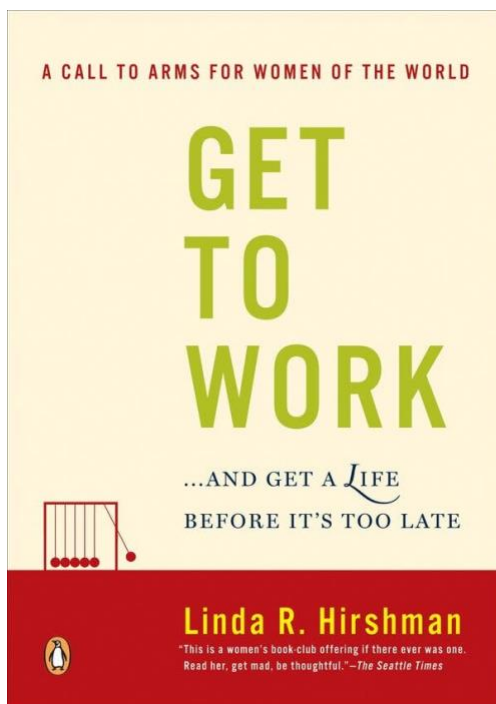
Feminine Mystique” — supported the trend as just another choice in an arsenal of choices that granted women agency.

Not so, she declared in her article, which was titled “Homeward Bound.” Staying home, she said, was a very, very bad choice.

Her particular target was affluent women with elite degrees; she argued that their disappearance from the halls of power in law, business and politics was not just harmful to them personally — housework and child rearing, she warned, were intellectually stagnant and soul-crushing endeavors — but to the country as a whole, because their absence meant that more than half of the American population would be underrepresented in the places where policy was made.

Her research method was unique. In 2003, she tracked down subjects from The New York Times’s 1996 wedding announcements — “What better sample,” she wrote, “than the brilliantly educated and accomplished brides of the ‘Sunday Styles’?” — and queried them on their home life. Most of the women — including a gastroenterologist, a lawyer and a corporate vice president — had left their jobs to be stay-at-home mothers.

The new glass ceiling, Ms. Hirshman averred, was at home.



Ms. Hirshman’s provocative 2005 article in The American Prospect managed to offend just about everybody. She turned it into a book the next year. Credit...via Penguin Random House

And she had some thoughts on how to fix the problem, which she cannily couched as her “rules,” evoking the regressive 1995 dating primer, “The Rules”:

Don't just stay in the work force, she wrote, but choose a job to give you economic prowess — the white-shoe law firm over nonprofit work or the arts. Marry down, so you have the power in the relationship and he has to do the dishes (although her contention that a starving artist would be a useful househusband was one of the more dubious points in her article) — or stop worrying about the dishes altogether.

“The home-economics trap involves superior female knowledge and superior female sanitation,” she wrote. “The solutions are ignorance and dust. Never figure out where the butter is. ‘Where’s the butter?’ [Nora Ephron’s](#) legendary riff on marriage begins. In it, a man asks the question when looking directly at the butter container in the refrigerator. ‘Where’s the butter?’ actually means butter my toast, buy the butter, remember when we’re out of butter. Next thing you know you’re quitting your job at the law firm because you’re so busy managing the butter.”

Ms. Hirshman added: “If women never start playing the household-manager role, the house will be dirty, but the realities of the physical world will trump the pull of gender ideology. Either the other adult in the family will take a hand or the children will grow up with robust immune systems.”

And if all that sounds overwhelming, Ms. Hirshman wrote, make your life easier by having only one child.

[Ms. Hirshman succeeded in offending just about everybody](#). Feminists and mommy bloggers berated her; many on the religious right fretted over her soul. She landed on “60 Minutes,” where Lesley Stahl called her judgmental. After she appeared on “Good Morning America,” she was told that so many incensed viewers had emailed ABC News to express their displeasure that they crashed the server.

[David Brooks took her to task](#) in his column in The Times, arguing for the primacy of the family in shaping society and suggesting that Ms. Hirshman spend a few hours in a high-powered law firm and see how soul-crushing that was. (She was amused, she said later, that he did not seem to know that she had actually been a high-powered lawyer.)

[“Everybody Hates Linda,”](#) read the headline of one article, neatly summing up the ruckus.

“She was making this very radical, kind of bananas argument, with all these rules,” [the feminist author](#) Rebecca Traister said by phone. But Ms. Traister recalled admiring Ms. Hirshman for her willingness to engage her critics. “Linda didn’t want to just put her very assured arguments out in the world and have them swallowed whole,” she said. “She wanted people to tussle with her over them.”

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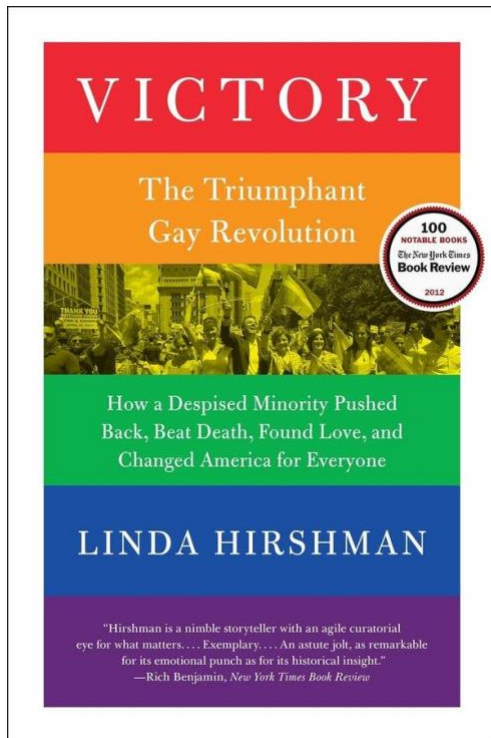
Ms. Hirshman lecturing at Brandeis University in 1999. She taught philosophy and women's studies there for several years. Credit...via the Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections Department, Brandeis University

Linda Diane Redlick was born on April 26, 1944, in Cleveland. Her parents, Charles and Sylvia (Bogart) Redlick, owned and ran a carpet and floor coverings store. (She said in [an interview](#) on the Comedy Central show "The Colbert Report" in 2006 that she had been raised by both her parents.)

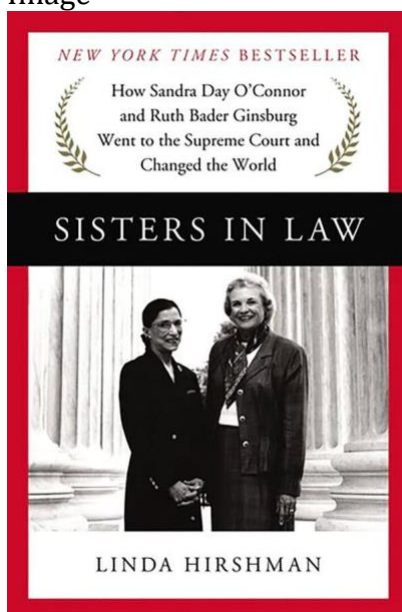
She studied political science and government at Cornell University, where she met her first husband, Harold Hirshman. They married in 1966. She received her J.D. from the University of Chicago Law School in 1969 and began working for a firm that represented labor unions. While there, she argued a few cases before the Supreme Court, including a landmark one protecting overtime pay for municipal workers.

But over the course of Ronald Reagan's presidency, unions' powers were diminishing and Ms. Hirshman felt she could no longer be of help, her daughter, Ms. Shapiro, said. She began teaching law from a feminist perspective at the Chicago-Kent College of Law, where she became more and more interested in philosophy. She earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Illinois Chicago, in 1995, and from 1996 to 2002 she taught philosophy and women's studies at Brandeis University.

Image



After publishing her first book, Ms. Hirshman turned her attention to social movements. Her “Victory” is a lively history of the gay rights movement. Credit...via Harper Collins Image



In “Sisters in Law,” Ms. Hirshman followed the paths of the first and second female Supreme Court Justices. Credit...via HarperCollins

The American Prospect article grew into a book, “Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World” (2006), after which Ms. Hirshman turned her attention to social movements. Four more books followed.

“Victory: The Triumphant Gay Revolution” (2012) is a lively history of the gay rights movement. The cultural critic Rich Benjamin, [reviewing it for The New York Times Book Review](#), praised Ms. Hirshman’s nimble storytelling and called the book “a sprawling account of juicy trysts, hushed political meetings, internecine movement skirmishes, sudden mutinies and activists turning personal humiliation into rocket fuel.”

[“Sisters in Law: How Sandra Day O’Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg Went to the Supreme Court and Changed the World”](#)(2015) follows the paths of the first and second female Supreme Court justices. [“Reckoning: The Epic Battle Against Sexual Abuse and Harassment”](#) (2019) traces the history of workplace harassment from early legal cases to Monica Lewinsky (Ms. Hirshman had harsh words for the liberal women who gave President Bill Clinton a pass) to the Me Too movement. Her most recent book, [“The Color of Abolition: How a Printer, a Prophet, and a Contessa Moved a Nation”](#) (2022), examines how two leading abolitionists tried to undermine [Frederick Douglass](#).

In addition to her daughter, Ms. Hirshman is survived by her stepdaughters, Margot Ettlinger and Elyse Cutler, and seven grandchildren. Her marriage to Mr. Hirshman, a lawyer, ended in divorce in 1984. Her second husband, David Forkosh, a doctor, died in 2012.

At Ms. Hirshman’s death, she was working on a book with [Margaret Sullivan](#), the media and political columnist, about the roots of right-wing media and how its growth has destabilized democracies in several countries, including the United States. The working title was “Hate, Inc.”

“Linda was the intellectual heft and energy behind the project,” Ms. Sullivan said by phone. “I can’t imagine going forward on it without her. She had such rare vision.”