

Women in the 1950s

Central Historical Question:

Is the image of the happy 1950s housewife accurate?

Materials:

- Women in the 1950s PowerPoint
- Copies of Women in the 1950s Documents A-D
- Copies of Women in the 1950s Graphic Organizer

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introductory lecture: PowerPoint

Slide 1: Suburban communities exploded in the 1950s.

Slide 2-3: The first mass-produced suburb, Levittown, New York, was built in 1951.

- These homes were affordable.
- Many young couples were able to buy a home b/c of the GI Bill—a law that said the federal government would back loans to WWII veterans.
- The homes were built quickly and cheaply; mass production resulted in uniformity of design and *homogenous* suburban neighborhoods.

Slides 4: Additionally, the decade after WWII included a “baby boom;” millions of Americans began having families.

Slide 5: Life in suburbia encouraged conformity; there was pressure to “keep up with the Joneses” with material purchases (e.g., cars, appliances, etc.).

New forms of media, in particular, the television, promoted consumer culture.

Slide 6-7: Media created a new suburban ideal. *Leave it to Beaver*: the white, nuclear family with specific gender roles.

2. Do Now: *Look at these images (Slide 7) that were printed in popular magazines in the 1950s. According to these images, what do you think life was like for suburban women in the 1950s?*

Share out responses.

3. Transition: *Today, we are going to continue investigating the question of what was life like for suburban women in the 1950s, specifically: Is the image of the happy 1950s housewife accurate? Why or why not? We are going to examine two rounds of documents in order to develop an historical claim.*
4. Round 1: Hand out Documents A and B. Students complete Graphic Organizer in groups.
5. Individually, students write hypothesis #1.
6. Share out and discuss hypotheses.
7. Round 2: Hand out Documents C and D. Students complete Graphic Organizer in groups.
8. Share out final hypotheses and evidence to back final claims.
9. Discussion:
 - Were housewives happy with their lives?
 - Were women in the 1950s just staying at home?
 - Documents A and B say women were staying at home; but Documents C and D say that women were politically involved and even working. Who should we believe?
 - Do you think African American, Latino, Asian American, and women from other minority groups had similar experiences to those depicted in these documents?

Citations:

Harry Henderson, "The Mass-Produced Suburbs: How People Live in America's Newest Towns." *Harper's Weekly*, November 1953. <http://harpers.org/archive/1953/11/0006495>

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963. Chapter 1.

Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Mar., 1993), pp. 1455-1482.

Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 2003, pp. 301-302.

Document A: *Harper's Weekly*, 1953 (Modified)

The daily pattern of household life is governed by the husband's commuting schedule. It is entirely a woman's day because virtually every male commutes. Usually the men must leave between 7:00 and 8:00 A.M.; therefore they rise between 6:00 and 7:00 A.M. In most cases the wife rises with her husband, makes his breakfast while he shaves, and has a cup of coffee with him. Then she often returns to bed until the children get up. The husband is not likely to be back before 7:00 or 7:30 P.M.

This leaves the woman alone all day to cope with the needs of the children, her house-keeping, and shopping. (Servants, needless to say, are unknown). When the husband returns, he is generally tired, both from his work and his traveling. . . . Often by the time the husband returns the children are ready for bed. Then he and his wife eat their supper and wash the dishes. By 10:00 P.M. most lights are out.

For the women this is a long, monotonous (boring) daily [routine]. Generally the men, once home, do not want to leave. They want to "relax" or "improve the property" -putter around the lawn or shrubbery. However, the women want a "change." Thus, groups of women often go to the movies together.

Source: Harry Henderson, "The Mass-Produced Suburbs: How People Live in America's Newest Towns." Harper's Weekly, November 1953. Harry Henderson based his observations on extensive visits, observations, and interviews in 1950s suburbs.

Document B: *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (Modified)

The problem . . . was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, . . . lay beside her husband at night--she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--"Is this all?" . . .

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished . . . core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their station-wagons full of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor. They baked their own bread, sewed their own and their children's clothes, kept their new washing machines and dryers running all day. . . . Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. . .

*Source: Betty Friedan was one of the early leaders of the Women's Rights movement that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. She published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. In the book, Friedan discusses how stifled and unsatisfied many suburban women were in the 1950s.*

Document C: Historian Joanne Meyerowitz (Modified)

The *Woman's Home Companion* (a popular women's magazine) conducted opinion polls in 1947 and 1949 in which readers named the women they most admired. In both years the top four women were [women involved in politics].

The postwar popular magazines were also positive about women's participation in politics. The *Ladies' Home Journal* had numerous articles that supported women as political and community leaders. One article in the *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1947 encouraged women to "Make politics your business. Voting, office holding, raising your voice for new and better laws are just as important to your home and your family as the evening meal or spring house cleaning."

[This shows that women at the time believed that individual achievement and public service were at least as important as devotion to home and family].

Source: Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." The Journal of American History, Vol. 79, No. 4 (Mar., 1993), pp. 1455-1482. Meyerowitz examined 489 articles in eight monthly magazines from the 1950s.

Document D: Historian Alice Kessler-Harris (Modified)

At first glance, the 1950s was a decade of the family... But already the family was flashing warning signals. . . . Homes and cars, refrigerators and washing machines, telephones and multiple televisions required higher incomes . . . The two-income family emerged. In 1950, wives earned wages in only 21.6 percent of all families. By 1960, 30.5 percent of wives worked for wages. And that figure would continue to increase. Full- and part-time working wives contributed about 26 percent of the total family income.

Source: Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, 2003, pp. 301-302.