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: Title slide

   Slide 2: World War II brought unprecedented economic growth to the U.S. This booming economy created a large demand for labor, especially with many Americans serving in the military. This offered new job opportunities for women and minorities.
   - Women worked in new jobs in the war industry or in filling jobs vacated by those who went to war
   - About 300,000 American women served in the military during WWII

   Slide 3:
   - At the end of the war, women in jobs that had been traditionally filled by men were fired to make way for returning male veterans
   - Employment rates for women continued to increase in the 1950s, but women were again mostly limited to what were considered “women’s jobs,” such as teaching, clerical work, domestic labor, and being store clerks
   - As the U.S. deindustrialized and its service sector grew, many middle-class white women worked as typists and secretaries, who were unable to rise higher in employment ranks due to gender discrimination.
   - Opportunities for African-American women continued to be very limited so that many could only work as domestic laborers, though some were schoolteachers and, in the North, clerical workers

   Slide 4:
   - Women faced huge social pressures to marry young (late teens or early 20s) and have a big family
Women who could attend college were expected to go only to find a husband, not a career path.
Women were pressured to be stay-at-home mothers if their families could afford it. Most minority families could not afford this.
Single mothers were often shunned.
Cold War propaganda transmitted the idea that strong nuclear families would help the U.S. beat the USSR.

Slide 5: Not only were women marrying younger than before, they were having babies right away and continued to for decades. From 1940 to 1960, the number of families with three children doubled and the number of families having a fourth child quadrupled.

Slide 6:
- The media portrayed domesticity as the ideal for women.
- Television shows and women’s magazines claimed that women were most responsible for their children and husband’s happiness and well-being.
- Women were told to keep their houses and appearances flawless.
- Leave it to Beaver: the white, nuclear family with specific gender roles.

domesticity: home or family life
ideal: what is considered most suitable or perfect

Slide 7:
- The first mass-produced suburb, Levittown, New York, was built in 1951. These homes were affordable.
- Many returning veterans were able to buy a house because 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.
- Millions of African Americans moved out of the South and into Northeastern, Midwestern, and Western cities during the Great Migration, causing “white flight” to the suburbs.

Slide 8: 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, with household products being strongly marketed to women.

2. Do Now: Look at these images (Slide 8) 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: (Slide 9) 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, Latina, Asian American, and women from other minority groups had similar experiences to those depicted in these documents?
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Citations:


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.

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.*
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].

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.