

Sexism in 1950s was  
however normal  
history essay



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During the 1950s, women were in the most cases depicted as an elegant housewife, always smiling, dressed perfectly all time of the day. Above all, she could manage the roles of a loyal and feminine wife, caring mother, the cook and the maid, what is more women were shown as the queens of domesticity. Moreover, best impression of how media portrayed women we can get from the book "The 1950s" by William H. Young and Nancy K. Young "Throughout the fifties, popular media portrayed American women as possibly the best-dressed housekeepers ever seen." [1]

Sexism in 1950s was, however, normal and both men and women tolerated it. Despite how insulting advertisements were toward the female population, people tolerated it and accepted stereotype of being the housewives.

Because of broadly accepted stereotyping and gender bias during the 1950s, as well as idea that a woman should live for her husband and family became a dominant image. Consequently, this led to debates concerning female rights and roles. "Often feminists, due to their biases and personal/political agendas, identify the 1950s as the pinnacle of gender inequality.

Furthermore, they claim that mass media especially advertising in women's magazines perpetuated the denigration of women. According to them, ads during this time period portrayed women as stupid, submissive, purely domestic creatures." [2]

Advertisements in the 1950s most commonly were advertising wives as being influenced and controlled by their husbands. Furthermore,

Advertisements targeted women, showing them in the kitchen, using feminine products in order to impress their husbands, having a conversation with their children, cleaning or expressing the joy of receiving the latest

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house appliance so that they can improve their home. Because women had substantial influence on purchasing decisions, advertisers attempted to make it easy for women to relate, so to effectively market and sell their products. Moreover, advertisers emphasized roles of women in the domestic sphere so that they can relate more to them.

## 6. Hoover

Picture 1. (<http://www.businesspundit.com/10-most-sexist-print-ads-from-the-1950s/?img=21457>)[3]

Picture 1 shows a popular print advertisement from the 1950s, representing a woman receiving a Hoover as a present for a Christmas. Picture clearly indicates that woman should be happy, as for now her work in cleaning the house is much easier. Picture describes that their place is in the house, their role is to maintain it, please the husband and keep family happy. From this picture there are no indications that women can work, earn payment or pursue a career.

As 1950s is the period after World War II, advertisements depicted image of happy families, as soldiers came home after a war and they wanted to start families. Because of this women chose to stay at home and raise families. Consequence of this we can see in the book "The Feminine Mystique" by Betty Friedan who was the leading figure in the Women's movement and the book was often credited for sparking the Second Wave of American feminists.

**“ By the end of the nineteen-fifties, the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping, into the teen. Fourteen million girls were engaged by 17. The proportion of women attending college in comparison with men dropped from 47 per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 1958. A century earlier, women had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a husband. By the mid-fifties, 60 per cent dropped out of college to marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar. Colleges built dormitories for “ married students,” but the students were almost always the husbands. A new degree was instituted for the wives – “ Ph. T.” (Putting Husband Through).”[4]**

We can see that women were getting married much earlier and women went to college to find a man and not with the reason to educate. Furthermore, they had a dose of fear that if they educate it could prevent them from getting married. Moreover, women received a degree when they helped a husband during his education while they were married. This is a time of baby boom, as more couples were getting married and as a result more babies were born. Soldiers were achieving their dreams of starting a family.

Despite, in the late 1950s as more women entered the workforce another kind of advertisements started. However, Friedan in her book “ The Feminine Mystique” states otherwise “ In the 1950’s they printed virtually no articles except those that serviced women as housewives, or described women as housewives, or permitted a purely feminine identification like the Duchess of Windsor or Princess Margaret.”[5]Feminist often followed their personal agendas and were not objective. In the book “ Mad Men, Mad Women” by Joy

Parks we can see that in the late 1950s and early 1960s women were among powerful people in advertising world “ Despite what Mad Men would have you believe, in the late 1950s and early 1960s several of the most powerful people in New York advertising world were women – three of the better known being Mary Wells Lawrence, Shirley Polykoff and Jane Trahey.”[6]

We can obviously see that feminist were not always true, and did not provide true information about the image of the women in advertisements.

As women now had jobs, advertisements portrayed them as secretaries, clerks and telephone operators using latest office equipment.

Smith Corona Electric Portable Typewriter (1958)

Picture 2. (<http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/gender-ads-1950s> 30 January 2013)[7]

Even though women were now depicted as having a job and were more independent then before, they still were always showed as subordinate of men, they were employees and not bosses, followers rather than leaders. Overall, advertisements reminded that a woman is in need for finding a man by her side and her purpose is to help men succeed.

1950s were hard for women, 1950s were full of stereotypes and sexism against women and even though advertisements showed women as subordinate of men and that their place is at home, women and also men tolerated it. Furthermore, women wanted to live this way as they went to colleges with a purpose of finding a man. However, there were women who

were in power and were not living this way, they sent different depiction of women that they can be similar to men, work and pursue a career.

As feminists criticize 1950s to be full of stereotypes and that women should not live the way of being a queen of domesticity, many times feminists oppress women who lived this way and majority of women have lived this way and were happy.