

# Role of a 1950s american housewife history essay



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Throughout the 1950's housekeeping duties and taking care of the family was considered a role of the women. Majority of the girls got married at very tender ages and some even ended their opportunities to study in order to get married. They quickly became wives and they established their families by giving birth to many children and becoming young mothers. However, during the Second World War, there was a work force shortage and therefore women were required to take up factory jobs. Immediately after the Second World War the number of women who were working drastically dropped. All the single women who were working were required to quit their jobs in order to get married. The television offered different shows that represented the appropriate gender roles. Being a housewife was the fashionable thing to do and those who followed their careers were considered unwise. This trend did not last for a very long time as there raised a group of feminist movements. These movements influenced how women viewed the existing gender roles.

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In the 1950's women received very little say and respect within the society. The women had specific roles that were centered within the household. Women were expected to perform house chores such as keeping the house clean and tidy and taking care of their children. They cooked food and baked bread while also sewing their own clothes. The women ensured that they prepare a warm and delicious meal for their husbands to eat after a long and tedious day at work. This was seen as a sign that they cared and often thought of their husbands. The women also made sure that they cleaned and refreshed themselves just before their husbands arrive. They applied makeup and dressed up in pretty dresses with ribbons in order to look

appealing to their husbands. They also ensured that they clear the house of any kind of clutter so that their husbands would return to a clean and comfortable environment. The housewives were also required to make sure that they washed up and dressed all their children and ensure that they had neatly combed hair just before their father's arrival. On the husband's arrival, the housewives made sure that the home did not have unnecessary noise. It was important that they warmly welcome their husbands with a kind embrace. The housewives were expected to maintain the children's discipline while enjoying a meal. The women avoided arguments with their husbands and they barely complained even when displeased. Their responsibility was to ensure that they offered their husbands a quiet time to unwind. They gave their husbands a listening ear and gave them soothing refreshments.[2]

The women in the 1950s were so inclined to their house chores, their children, and husbands that they hardly thought about their own careers. During this period, any woman who did not conform to the housewife role was faced with immense criticism. The women in this era were not provided with equal opportunities as the men. Women were expected to be fully dependent on the men for the provision of all their needs and requirements. The women were required to stay at home in order to take care of their homes, children, and even husbands. No woman received any recognition or credit for being learned or for holding a good job position. It was just important for them to be available in the home for their children and husband. It was very important for them to be present in all the development stages of their children. They also got the opportunity to monitor their

children's learning process and their health conditions. This role was considered an especially difficult task for the women who opted to go to work. This is because of the limited time available to cater for their homes and children and many husbands did not admire such wives. Women were required to be well spoken to their children, husbands and the public. Especially in public, the housewives were expected to introduce themselves properly and not to engage in intelligent conversation. They were not expected to actively talk in the presence of men. In case they disagreed with a certain topic, they were not allowed to voice their opinions. They were expected to be careful about their language content while ensuring that they avoid profanity. Women were in many cases judged according to their homes. The society measured how clean their houses were, their children's behavior, how happy their husbands were, how they spoke and carried themselves in public.[3]

During this period, women were required to remain in their marriage setup despite the challenges. Housewives never considered divorce as it attracted a lot of stigma from the society. Women who opted for a divorce were unwelcome within the society and they were faced with huge difficulties. This was especially because they had limited education levels and they unavailability of decent jobs for women. This essentially made it difficult for women to get a home to live in and food for them and their children to eat. Marriage was actually considered a huge incentive for all women and their children. Women sacrificed their happiness and instead worked very hard to ensure that their husbands were happy. They did this in order to maintain a happy home and marriage and to avoid chances of a divorce. Housewives at

times had to deal with physical abuse from their husbands and even cater for alcoholic husbands. Despite all this, the women had to persevere in their sad marriages due to stigmatization. Women were also responsible for childbearing despite how they felt. Once a woman got pregnant, she was obligated to give birth. The women gave birth irrespective of whether they were mentally, physically, or psychologically unprepared. The option or act of abortion attracted immense stigmatization even though they had a right to do as they pleased. The stigma caused many women to carry pregnancies that they were not interested in carrying to maturity.[4]

Women were comfortable with being housewives and barely pursued any form of higher education. After completing their high school education, many women were married and stayed at home. The number of men who attended school for their higher education was far greater than that of women. The education policy that was available in the 1950's was unfair since the education of women was not equally promoted and encouraged. Women were not offered equal opportunities as compared to the men. The women's roles and purposes in the social and economic environment were very limited. The few women who opted to work in the any available position were not considered good wives. This is because there was an assumption that they could not take care of their families properly and work at the same time. This assumption is due to the huge amount of work both at home and at work. Women who chose to work would be inclined to concentrate on one side and neglect the other. In most cases, a family would require a home assistant to take care of the children. The children would miss a mother's love, care, and attention. Therefore, women who pursued a career path in the

1950's usually ended up single since men were more interested in women who could take care of them bear children and personally take care of them children.[5]

In the 1950's toys such as the Barbie were used to depict the specific gender roles. Most of the toys that were made for little girls were used to mould them into desirable women. The toys allowed the young girls to have a good imagination of how their lives were required to turn out. The toys offered imitations of items and equipments that adult women used within the home. This was in order for the girls to have a feel of what exactly it meant to be a housewife and the chores involved. The boys on the other hand had toys that characterized men as strong and courageous. The color television also strongly affected the roles of women with the shows and advertisements that aired. The color television had impact due to the availability of color that made advertisements more appealing. The television aired advertisements that promoted sexism in the direction of women. The advertisements assumed that women were expected to take up certain roles such as cleaning, childbearing and, cooking. Sexism towards women is today considered discriminatory but in the 1950's it was considered a very normal thing. Women were in those days trained to accept the stereotype that assumed women were meant to be housewives. Other adverts portrayed women as dependants on men who fully controlled them and influenced their behaviors. The advertisements confined the women within the home environment and to their household chores. They also offered women with the ideal image of a beautiful housewife and the desired beauty products.

Books and magazines written by influential writers also offered a reference point for all housewives in the 1950's.[6]

Iconic figures seen in televisions, magazines and written in books also influenced the role of women. Individuals such as Marilyn Monroe, Lucille Ball and Grace Kelly were amongst the most influential women in the 50's. Merylin Monroe was a sex symbol and women all over the United States worked very hard to imitate her behaviors to get attention from their husbands. It was important in the 1950's to look appealing and desirable to one's husband and sexual demeanor played an essential role. Its greatest role was to ensure that every husband was comfortable and fully satisfied within the marriage. It also assisted to enhance closeness, faithfulness, minimize arguments, and ensure that no divorces occur. Grace Kelly was a fashion icon and women were inclined to follow her fashion trends. It was important for the 1950's woman to dress up and look pretty. After a long day from work or while attending social functions it was important for men to find and show up with smartly dressed women. The women would always want to look fashionable at every time and season. It was therefore the responsibility of every housewife to be on the high alert for any changes and new trends. Lucille Ball on the other hand acted in a famous television show called " I love Lucy." The show p portrayed Lucy as the classic 1950's housewife. She acted as the major character that was very loving and caring for her husband Ricardo. However, Lucy defended herself and did not allow anyone to direct her actions. She worked hard to portray an independent housewife who did not accept to be shoved around. Her acting opened up and influenced other

housewives' behaviors while ensuring that they remained to be loving and caring to their husbands.[7]

### The 1950's Housewife Influence on Feminism

The 1950s have been referred as the bleak era of feminism. After the end of the Second World War, there was a new emphasis on the nuclear family as the basis of the welfare state in Britain. During the War, women were allowed to work outside their homes and took part in the War efforts; however, after the war elapsed, they were encouraged to take the roles of mothers and wives. The government aimed to reestablish the two as the primary occupation for women.[8]By 1985, 75 percent of the adult women were married; more specifically, 84. 8 percent of women between 45 and 49 years were married.[9]At the time, married had become even more popular than before the prewar period.

Furthermore, in the post war era, childcare facilities were closed, and there was a limited aid being advanced to working women. However, the state implemented social reforms, which were aimed at providing family allowances that were meant for subsidizing families. More specifically, the subsidies were aimed at supporting women in their roles as wives and mothers.[10]Despite the numerous efforts targeted at helping women, they were not satisfied by the position they were accorded. Sue Bruely observes and laments that the progressive vision adopted in the New Britain after the war was fundamentally flawed in its conservative view on women.[11]The media: films, radio, and women's magazines had a significant role in shaping the society, these include the attitudes of women towards formal



employment. The media had a regressive attitude and positively sought to discourage women from combining employment and marriage. The media embarked on discouraging women from pursuing careers and laid emphasis on the woman's domesticity and dependence, and encouraged women to return to their noble duties in the kitchen and nursery. Furthermore, television and radio aired women's programs that were dogmatic, and aimed at reinforcing the woman as a successful housewife.

Despite the tremendous efforts being laid to return women at their noble duty of being a housewife, the 1950s witnessed a massive stride towards attaining parity for women. This included parity on such issues as equal pay for teachers in 1952, and in male and female positions in the civil service in 1954. The achievement can be traced to the various efforts of feminist movements. For instance, Edith Summerskill fought for the rights of women both in parliament and through the conventional non-party pressure groups throughout the 1950s. Furthermore, the feminist writers at the time, such as Viola Klein and Alva Myrdal argued that women could juggle both employment and household jobs well. The era of 1950s has come to be referred to as "welfare feminism." The majority of the feminists' leaders argued that they adopted a position, which could be termed as reasonable modern feminism; the position advocated for sexual diversity and sought to establish the social contribution by women rather than call for impartiality or equality of gender. During the 1950s, feminism was mainly concerned with social responsibility, and aimed to promote the general welfare of the society.

The 1960s fall in the second wave of the feminist movement, and it aimed at putting an end to the social and cultural inequalities between sexes. The achievements made by feminists in the second wave can be traced to the efforts made in the 1950s. The 1950s have seemed like a tranquil moment regarding the traditional notions of the family; however, various trends and events that took place in this period had significant contributions to the liberation of women that gained momentum in the 1960s. In the years following the Second World War, the number of college students grew significantly. However, a significant number of women who had attained college education were married soon after or were married before completing college. In their adopted new roles as housewives, they were soon to be bored and frustrated by the repetitive household jobs and became unsatisfied with their responsibilities as mothers. These women contributed greatly to the feminist movement that took route in the 1960s. Additionally, though traditional wisdom dictated that the responsibility of women was restricted at home, a significant number of women made a valuable contribution in supplementing their husband's incomes. The Life magazine reported that women held a third of all the jobs available in the United States in 1956. A significant number of these women enjoyed their professions, sought promotion, and equal pay; however, the few rewards and legal resources that were available for women disappointed them[12]These discriminatory practices increased the number of women who opted to join the feminist movement. Furthermore, the successes in the civil right movement cases such as the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, which outlawed racial segregation in public schools, persuaded women to believe that reforms were indeed possible.

## The Lessons the Modern Woman Can Learn From the 1950s Housewife

For many years, women suffered a sense of dissatisfaction; however, each woman struggled with the problem alone.[13]The materials that were published on women emphasized on enlightening women to seek their fulfillment as wives and mothers. Repeatedly, women were subjected to conventional voices and Freudian sophistications, that they should not desire a greater destiny than their own femininity. The published articles emphasized on educating women on catching and keeping a man, breastfeeding, handling toilet training, coping with sibling rivalry, and breastfeeding; how to purchase a dish washer, bake, and to cook gourmet snails. Furthermore, women were taught on looking, dressing, and making their marriage successful by acting in a feminine manner; and on how to keep their husbands youthful and their sons from becoming delinquents. The lessons also emphasized that women should pity rather than envy the irrational, unfeminine, and unhappy women who sought to be poets, psychiatrists, and presidents. Women learnt that a true feminine did not pursue professions, higher education, political rights, and the opportunities sought by the old-fashioned feminists.[14]Therefore, a significant number of the 1950s women devoted their lives from an early age to seeking to find a husband and bearing children.

The end of the 1950s was marked with a massive decline in the number of women attending college while the average marriage age dropped to 20 years. Additionally, by the age of 17 years, a significant number of women were engaged. Many women were unhappy with what was commonly referred to as the problem with no name, or the housewife's syndrome as <https://assignbuster.com/role-of-a-1950s-american-housewife-history-essay/>

referred by some doctors; however, women continued to have more babies. More so, college students were engaged in having more babies, as opposed to pursuing careers. The women had no career goals, and their aspirations were limited to being married and raising a family; however, they were overly dissatisfied, desperate, and lacked a personality. Women were mere food servers, putter-on of pants, and bed makers. The housewife was unappreciated. The 1950s woman was a stereotypical woman-in-distress, who is always dependent on her husband for survival. She is also perceived as an inept woman; the woman-driver, the extravagant wife who cannot budget and is the primary cause of the man's downfall. Women were not expected to attend college and most women were married straight after high school and assumed the traditional roles. Women who showed braveness and continued to college were not taught science and mathematics; rather, they were allowed to pursue home economics and cooking. More so, women were not allowed to join in conversations, and men feared learned women due to their tendency to think of their interests and to disagree with the men. Despite the hard and unhappy life of the 1950s women, they have valuable lessons for the modern-day woman.

Citing the problems faced by the housewives, the home economist suggested a lack of proper preparation for the housewife; thus, he suggested a more realistic preparation for the housewives, such as high-school classes in home appliances. The home economics class was designed for the female students, and the contents of the course reflected the larger social cultural context in which the home economics was situated in the 1950s.

Furthermore, college educators came up with suggestions on increasing the

number of discussion groups on home organization and family issues, and on the preparations of women on their adjustment to fit domestic lives and its subsequent roles. These were valuable suggestions for the benefit of both the 1950s woman and the modern woman.

The role of women in the 1950s was a retrospective role in various ways. The society had massive expectations on women's behavior both at home and in public. Women had certain roles and the society expected them to fulfill the roles without failure. A woman was expected to be an industrious homemaker, and an obedient and caring wife to her husband and family. Home The ideal wife was expected to be restricted at home, and to nurture her family to gain respect from the society. A hard-working wife had the dinner ready by the time her career husband returned home from work, and a wife was only as valuable and respectable if she obeyed her husband, carried out his orders, and agreed with the husband without question. Even in instances where a woman wanted to voice her opinion, her lack of education would restrict her. The modern-day society is significantly different from that of the 1950s; however, the roles and responsibilities of the 1950s woman, though burdensome, are valuable to some extent.

The home economics lesson offered to the 1950s women is valuable to the modern-day housewives. The course taught the preparation of meals; however, it taught more than just the fundamentals of food preparation. The class contained other valuable lessons, which included the principles of food buying and food handling. Furthermore, there are valuable lessons in choosing the most cost-effective and healthy boxed meals from the supermarket, this is perceived as a symbol of success in America's

capitalism.[15]Furthermore, housewives of the 1950s were taught on buying such household appliances like the refrigerator and microwaves, these were valuable appliances in food handling and preservation. The lessons are structured to change and shape the minds of young American women. They blended the gender roles and technical issues involved in food preparation, and the marketers' interests in asserting a society, which was increasingly influenced by mass consumption agents.

The modern American society possesses similarities with the 1950s society.

The society is marked with numerous agents of mass consumption and promotional events that are aimed at promoting mass consumption.

Furthermore, the increased cost of living and advances in technology have necessitated budgeting and an increased need for budgeting. Therefore, the 1950s housewife offers numerous lessons for the modern-day housewife. The modern-day housewives can learn the principles of food buying and food handling, choosing the most cost-effective and healthy boxed meals from the supermarket, and buying such household appliances like the refrigerator and microwaves. These were critical lessons learned by the 1950s housewives and are of significance to the modern-day housewife.