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## The 1950's and the 1960's and the American Woman : the transition from the "housewife" to the feminist

Vanessa Martins Lamb

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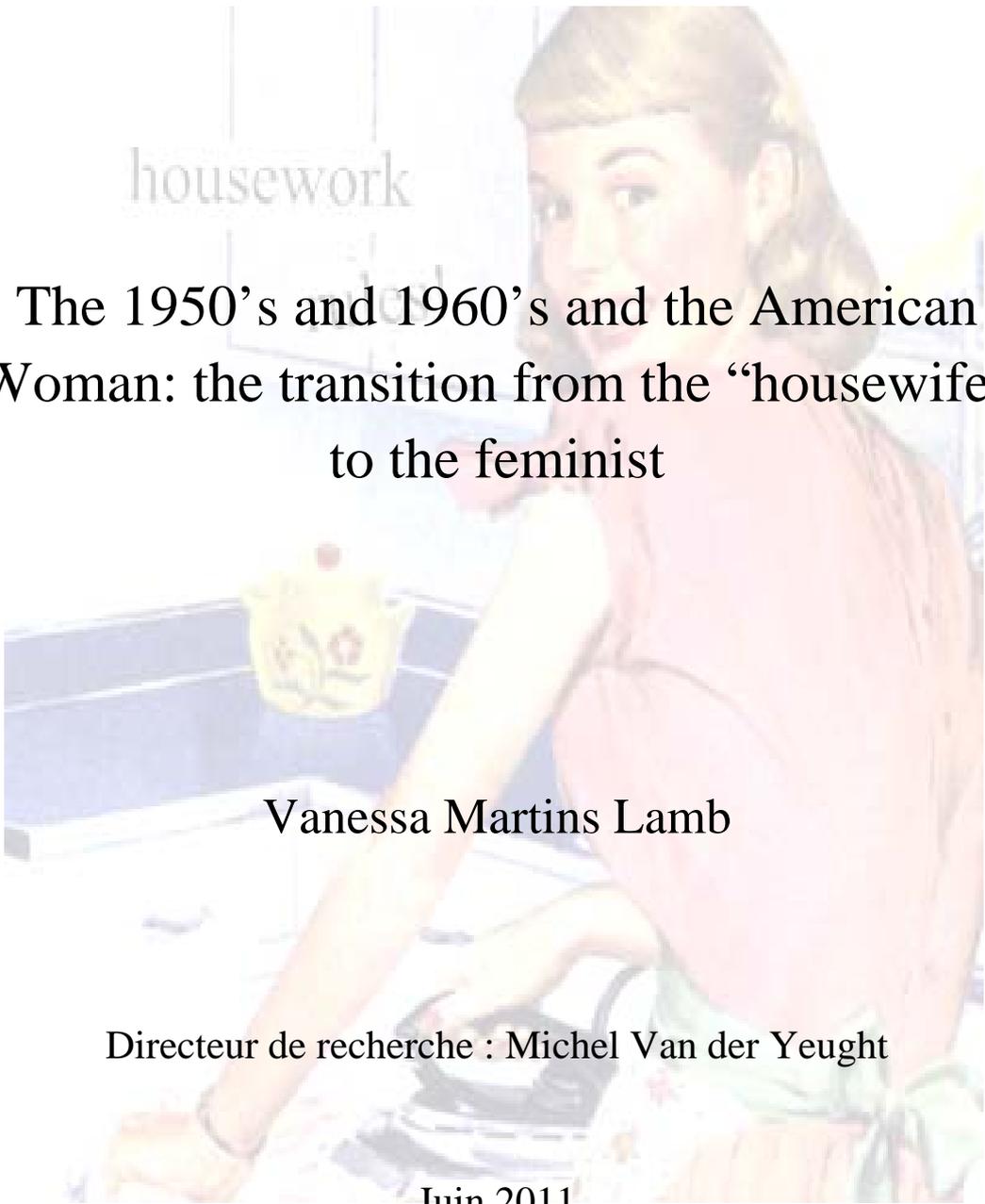
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The 1950's and 1960's and the American  
Woman: the transition from the “housewife”  
to the feminist

Vanessa Martins Lamb

Directeur de recherche : Michel Van der Yeught

Juin 2011

To my parents, Selma and Sérgio.

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## **Introduction**

“Have dinner ready, prepare yourself, prepare the children, minimize all noise, be happy to see him, listen to him, make the evening his”, here is what young women learned at school in the 1950’s in America. Thanks to “*Home Economics High School Text Book*” of 1954 (1), it was possible to discover how to be an ideal housewife, the woman for whom the maintenance of the house and the well-being of the family were fundamental priorities.

The analysis of this post World War II society, founded on the “American Way of Life”, its influence on the condition of women and the questioning of this social model, constitute the basis of this study. The American society in the 1950’s was mainly founded on the ideology of the housewife, shaped by magazines and other media targeted to women. The questioning of this idealistic view of women and the transformation of these housewives into committed feminists at the end of the 1950’s will form the central subject of the research. After the Second World War, marriage was the main goal for girls; family life was their major aspiration, and the manifestation of a “perfect” existence. However, the dissatisfaction that women started to feel at the end of the 1950’s became a national issue, summarized in the catch phrase “There is something missing”, deeply felt by a great many women.

Maintain the house, prepare meals, take care of the children, help them with their homework, be the ideal wife, do the dishes and the laundry while remaining elegant; that made the day of most American women in the 1950’s. Gradually a feeling of insufficiency appeared: “Is that all there is to life?” The main topic of this dissertation is to show that the evolution of this feeling toward a true claiming fight for women's rights made the 1950’s one key period for female emancipation.

As a historian, I have always been interested in this period, more particularly in its remarkable social and domestic esthetics and the duality between the eternal search for one “perfect life” and the reality of these women, many of whom lead a lonely and restricted life. A growing number of women looked for an answer to what Betty Friedan called “The problem that has no name” (Friedan 1997: 57) into therapists' offices. One crucial difference between us, modern women of the 2010’s, and the woman of the

1950's, is that they did not have the choice. Their future was already defined: going to university to prepare for marriage or rather to while away their time, (especially between white middle-class women) meeting with a boy that would suit their family, get married, have children and a beautiful house.

But suddenly, this life no longer appeared splendid; marriage was not so gratifying, the house became too small. Women changed the decoration of the house, the color of their hair, many of them changed neighborhoods, but they were still not happy, they felt that something was missing: a life apart from the family, a personality which would be different from their husbands'; therefore, their fight for autonomy started.

The main issue of this analysis is based on the understanding of the process that women lived to manage to break this model of the "ideal woman" imposed by this culture full of promises. Thus they started to fight for a new female ideal. Apparently, they had whatever a woman could wish: husbands with good jobs, healthy children, comfortable houses with large gardens, washing machines and televisions. Despite all these conveniences, women asked themselves every day, while preparing dinner or cleaning the house: "Who am I?" This interrogation was growing among these housewives. It exposed a need for a change in the paradigms of the time, to force that society to understand that for most women maintaining a house was not all there was in life. Or, as the common expression says: "A baked potato is not as big as the world".

The objective of this study is to analyze the transformation of 1950's women into feminists who looked for female autonomy; to understand how these housewives said no to all that was supposedly ideal and perfect, and started the fight for a better future, for a society that accepts women that live their emancipation and autonomy.

The methodology adopted is based on the literature concerning American feminism in the 1950's and 1960's, the contribution of women's magazines to the construction of the ideology of the housewife and the testimonies of women of that time published in books devoted to the woman's condition in the United States in the 1950's. The work of Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, is the main source of information on the condition of these housewives. Transparent testimonies give us an extremely clear vision of how women lived this illusion of a "perfect life" at the time.

The interest of this research is to break the idea of the 1950's as a period of glory, as "the golden days", when American society was organized in such a way that women were supposed to be perfectly and undeniably happy. The revelation of the true face of this culture is valid and important not only for historical reasons, but especially to understand the American woman of the time. Thanks to this feminine struggle, we, modern women, can choose between a family life and a professional life or choose to have both: to be a mother and a career woman at the same time. They showed that it is possible to work and have a family, that women are not obliged to choose between professional realization and personal fulfillment. Before the 1950's, women faced a dilemma: have a profession and a solitary life or have a family life by leaving aside their career ambitions. It is thanks to the 1950's women that today I can study for a future career and, at the same time, dream of a family life.

This new way of life established at the time in the United States, the "American Way of Life", and its influence on women, the construction of the ideology of the housewife and the crises of this ideology are the main points that will be developed in the first part of this work. The second part integrates the transformation of these women into committed feminists and their evolution until the revival of feminine activism in the 1960's and 1970's. With Simone de Beauvoir, we understand the importance of this long fight undertaken by women to become free and independent: "We are not born woman, we become it" (De Beauvoir 1948: 102).

*Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love? Who knows of the possibilities of love when men and women share not only children, home, and garden, not only the fulfillment of their biological roles, but the responsibilities and passions of the work that creates the human future and the full human knowledge of who they are? It has barely begun the search of women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete.*

Friedan, Betty. 1997. *The Feminine Mystique*.

## **1. The American woman in the 1950's: from the "ideal woman" to the woman in crisis**

### **1.1. "The American Way of Life" and women**

Before the 1950's, America suffered from almost twenty years of stagnation, caused by the Depression and World War II. Social changes were made in response to the difficult conditions in these changing years. When the war was over, American soldiers came home and society could finally focus on its future. At that moment America was finally ready to live its new way of life: "The American Way of Life".

When all these soldiers returned and started to found families, an enormous housing crisis took place, considering that no new house had been built in almost twenty years. The economy improved and the job market was into full expansion, but the housing crisis was extremely rigorous.

This housing problem forced the population to leave the cities and to settle in new districts: the suburbs. The suburbs appealed to almost all types of families, it was accessible to all, from the low-average class to the higher class. It was partly due to the fact that there were houses for everyone, from mansions in Greenwich, Connecticut, for \$62,000 to small houses for \$6,000 in the town of Daly, California.

The life in the suburbs was tempting. People were far from the city but all job opportunities were still available, families lived in comfortable houses, with large gardens and the social life was the bond between all inhabitants. The search for the feeling of community was a crucial characteristic of these districts. Barbecues, associations, cocktail parties and different types of popular activities were a part of everyday life for these families.

Children were the center of the suburban life, they were the reason why so many families were leaving big cities and moving into these areas where safety and community feeling were a major feature. At the beginning, the suburbs were not linked to cities by public transportation and few people had cars. This encouraged neighbors to help each other and to share cars to transport children. Women formed very tight groups

that offered mutual help and support. Brett Harvey points out this feeling of community that many suburban women shared and counted on:

Carol Freeman recalls the community of women in her suburb near San Diego: It was a warm, boring, completely child-centered little culture. We sat around in each other's kitchens and backyards and drank a lot of coffee and smoked a million cigarettes and talked about our children. There was some competition, yes, but mostly we were young mothers and we were learning from each other's children, too, so that we were able to get away some. (Harvey, 2002: 116)

Since the suburban development was a government answer against the housing crises, most residences were almost the same, the structure of these new neighborhoods was similar and people were living in almost identical houses all over the country. The real aim of the government was to encourage expansion outside city limits and to promote a family model based on the suburban lifestyle.

Architects condemned these uniform houses planned in the same way, social thinkers criticized this homogeneity of race, age and class and anticipated the end of individuality and diversity. But young couples did not bother, they were happy to give their families a decent home in a prosperous and pleasing community. During her research for oral testimonies about lifestyles in the 1950's, B. Harvey describes women's sentiments on finally getting a house for their families:

The house was surrounded by a lake of mud. But I was thrilled- it was a very exciting thing to have a house of your own. And everything you dreamed about was there, everything was working, brand-new, no cockroaches. You got a beautiful stainless steel sink with two drains, cabinets, drawers, a three-burner General Electric stove with oven, a Bendix washing machine. The only thing I had to buy for the house when we moved in was a fluorescent tube over the kitchen sink- the fixture was even there! (Harvey, 2002: 113)

Another sector of this society benefited from the suburbs: the car industry. Families were living far from schools, from business and shopping areas and required a fast and efficient means of transportation.

The car became a status symbol; manufacturers launched new models regularly and fostered the feeling that cars were an indication of success. With the development of these communities, business leaders saw an opportunity to develop their activities.

Stores, malls and huge parking lots were installed on roads, therefore democratizing further the well-known “consumer society”.

### **1.1.1. The Consumer Society**

The demonstration of the public’s desire and ability to buy new products was the increasing advertising industry. Families were being constantly stimulated to consume more and more. Americans were in love with this new society where almost all new technologies were available to anyone. “Tomorrow” and “the future” were expressions used repeatedly in ads for all kinds of products, from a simple vacuum cleaner to a super modern automobile.

People were fascinated with the new easy-to-clean fabrics named Enkalure, Celanese or Avcoset, with frozen and canned food and with all the new technologies. During a time when American industry was reconstructing itself, families felt it was their “patriotic duty to consume” and that this uncontrolled rush for new items every week was society’s contribution to build the new “American Way of Life”.

The postwar period was defined by Michael Kammen as a transition from the era of popular culture to the era of mass culture. According to Kammen “mass culture” is better defined in terms of individual’s relation to the cultural phenomenon than in terms of scale:

Thousands of people at an amusement park as opposed to many tens of millions worldwide watching the Super Bowl in January. [...] Popular culture is more often than not, as participatory and interactive, whereas mass culture...induces passivity and the privatization of culture.  
(Kammen, 1999: 21)

In addition, Kammen demonstrates that not only did consumption increase, but it became standardized: whereas in 1939 there were 3,900 super-markets in the United States, by 1944 there were more than 16,000. Culture was no longer represented by an intellectual elite such as thinkers and museums, it had become much more popular and available to a larger public:

(cultural power) depends on the production, promotion and dissemination of cultural artifacts.  
(Kammen, 1999: 137)

The economy opened up and the way of life of the population reflected this. These changes were particularly noticeable in fashion, in technological and industrial growth. Computers, transistors, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and microwaves became popular and the majority of them were very affordable. The most developed home appliance was by far the television set. Developed in the 1930's, television was the essential equipment in the house and in the life of a 1950's family.

As a result, society experienced a "baby-boom": there were 24.3 million children between 5 and 14 years in the 1950's and 35.5 million in the 1960's. In 1956 America had 13 million teenagers who wanted to live a different life from their parent's generation. They were more autonomous than the former generation; they did not have the concern to save money which their parents had at their age. All the money they gained was spent quickly in clothing, accessories for the hairstyle or rock'n roll records.

In "Deliberate Speed", W.T. Lhamon Jr. investigates this culture, arguing that the fifties were not a blank in cultural history and he affirms that the decade was "alive with vital art, new codes of behavior, and strong patterns of shape and energy that still survive without conventional acclaim" (1998: 5). The concept that the 1950's were a bland, conformist period, without real culture life was developed, according to Lhamon, during the decade itself:

If there was no serious culture, if balm was everywhere in the land, if everyman might happily oscillate between job and hearth, then Americans had successfully turned the corner from the discipline, privations, and social commitment of the war. (Lhamon, 1998: 3)

In Lhamon's persuasive concept, films like *Rebel without a Cause*, the music of Elvis Presley, and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* were not rare cultural expressions of a quiescent society, but instead constituted evidence, along with fast foods, interstate highways and motels, of a shift from "folk or oral culture" to "popular culture"; a transition similar to what Kammen identifies as the change from "popular" to "mass culture".

Lore, which previous generations had absorbed at Grandpa's or Uncle Remu's knee or on the store porch, was now absorbed basking in the blue glow of the TV, from the car radio, from

comics and theme parks. Instead of producing and participating in their own lore, fifties people began buying it ready-made, became its recipients. (Lhamon, 1998: 9)

The fact that 1950's popular culture came to people ready-made in the form of recordings, televisions and hamburger restaurants did not mean that the culture was not real or authentic, it only indicated that the technological means for its fast dissemination corresponded to its development.

Paradoxically, the Eisenhower period (1953-1961) was marked by a strong anxiety and by "The great fear" of communism and its supposed threat against American society. Even with the creation of new jobs and new social security structures, the president's failure to understand the importance of civil liberties and civilian life intensified the population's fear. Information provided by new technologies made Americans more paranoid: airplanes, televisions, radios and cars were reducing the isolationist spirit of the time, the population was increasingly aware of new countries and new threats.

All these anxieties made the validation of American institutions a vital point for the government and for society. Typically American values, such as democracy, freedom, family, progress and hard work were the foundations of the 1950's mindset. As Eugenia Kaledin expresses it:

If the fear of losing whatever was stable in America shaped many attitudes, much may be said for the concern for values that accompanied that fear. Few decades have produced a more interesting array of self-analytical social thought. (Kaledin 1984: 3)

In the fifties few Americans were thinking about society's problems, most of them were concerned about their new houses, their jobs, and how to provide their families all the consumer goods they had been deprived of during the war period. The future was something to be build on, to be made secure and certain; some events around the world frightened people and made American society insecure about its future: Russian H-bomb and the communism were America's main enemies.

This fear was easily manipulated by the Senator Joseph McCarthy into a hysterical feeling of danger within the country. A national anti-Communist campaign was launched and federal agents were allowed to get into people's private life in the name of

the research for possible communists among Americans citizens, the FBI destroyed reputations and lives.

The anti-communist obsession invaded communities, neighborhoods, institutions and the work world. Americans were been investigated because they were friends with black people, because they wouldn't sign into the volunteer civil defense duty or because they'd support a friend that lost his job under communism suspicion. McCarthy's campaign got out of control and public opinion was turning itself against the senator's devastating operation, especially after the nationally televised Army-McCarthy hearings:

A friend and I would arrange the day so that we'd get all the children sleeping at the same time so that we could listen. We weren't particularly liberal in those days, in fact, we were all pretty conservative. (...) I was genuinely worried about the Russians- I remember having dreams about the bomb. But we thought McCarthy was crazy. We were overjoyed when Welch finally started cutting him down. (Harvey, 2002: 204)

### **1.1.2. Family Life and the Work World**

In reality American social culture at the time was entirely based on the family. In that respect, the social organization relied on the traditional notions of the male and female role in the family: it was a model of community based on stereotypes.

Marriage was an incredible powerful institution during these years; people didn't ask themselves *if* they were going to get married, but *when* and *to whom*? Young women didn't have a doubt about having babies, but simply about *how many* babies they would give birth to. Americans were getting married earlier than ever: "the median marriage age dropped from 24.3 to 22.6 for men and from 21.5 to 20.4 for women" (Harvey, 2002: 69).

Most couples began their families right after marriage, women had an average of 3.2 children before their late twenties. Opposing popular beliefs, most of these housewives were highly educated women, but the idea that "family and books don't mix" was still extremely widespread. What are the factors that account for this impetuous rush into domesticity? It seems crucial to understand that after the war long period of deprivation

and difficulties young people were trying to rebuild a normal life and wanted to participate in the new post-war prosperity. But it was more than young and impulsive love that was pushing Americans into early marriage; it was a general attempt to elevate family and domesticity into a national obsession.

Society needed to establish the idea that prosperity, freedom and future were the main interests and that the harsh times of war were gone. Family structure was the most reliable means to develop the nation in a way that the new “American Way of Life” would be completely disseminated. Marriage was a secure, organized, private world, surrounded by consumer goods, children and expectations.

The battle-weary veterans returning home to rebuild their lives were thought to be in need of both shoring up and calming down. In order for them to adapt to ‘normal life’, the theory went, their masculinity must be domesticated and, at the same time, their battered egos bolstered and repaired. Everyone agreed this could best be accomplished within the clear-cut sex roles of the traditional family. (...) A strong family unit based on clearly defined sex roles seemed to be the solution. (Harvey, 2002: 72)

With the return of men after the war, women left their jobs to return home and be the “ideal” housewife. B. Friedan describes the daily routine which these women learned to live by testimonies of the time:

Ye Gods, what do I do with my time? Well, I get up at six. I get my son dressed and then give him breakfast. After that I wash dishes and bathe and feed the baby. Then I get lunch and while the children nap, I sew or mend or iron and do all the other things I can’t get done before noon. Then I cook supper for the family and my husband watches TV while I do the dishes. After I get the children to bed, I set my hair and then I go to bed. (Friedan 1997: 72)

During the war, millions of women had returned to work, they were encouraged to work in industrial factories to help with the war effort. These women discovered that they were able to carry out the “men’s work” and could earn the higher salaries usually associated with those jobs.

Many of them refused to leave this professional life and in response to this phenomenon the government launched a campaign to convince them to return to their role of housewives. On television and on the radio, official campaigns encouraged them to.

According to them, the patriotic duty of women was to give men their place back in the professional world.

Most certainly women were put under an immense pressure to return to their traditional role as mothers and housewives, completely dedicated to their children and dependent on their husbands. Some women felt the government was going too far when it started to promote the idea that women should be happy washing dishes, preparing meals, cleaning the house and be the “ideal” woman.

All these efforts carried out by the American government found their justification in the fact that women realized that they had the same capacities as men, that they were able to deal with the household finances, to repair the car or to take care of all the family’s needs. Against the threat of a change in the feminine role, the official efforts were to make women take back their places as housewives but essentially to make them obey the wills of their husbands, who had already sacrificed so much in the war.

However, a great deal of women of the lower classes returned to work as soon as the children started school. In spite of the government's campaign for women to stay at home, many of them had to work to help their husbands maintain the family’s standard of living. These women claimed more respect from the husbands, the families and society.

Any change in the nature of and female roles thus automatically affects the home, the economy, the school, and perhaps above all, the definition of who we are as human beings. (Chafe, 2007: 224)

Thanks to the sentence of William Chafe, it is possible to understand why the American society of the 1950’s was so focused on this campaign for the return to the traditional feminine housewife model.

In her study, *American Women in the 1950’s: Mothers and More*, E. Kaledin analyzes the importance of women’s contributions to the society of the time. She shows that our historical comprehension of the fifties should include the part played by women in the period.

I attempt to catalog the many ways women with some choice managed, in Gerda Lerner's words, to play a role in history on their own terms. I believe that women's overall contributions to the decade were humanizing and important. (Kaledin 1984, preface)

Still, according to Kaledin, we cannot continue to think of 1950's women only as housewives and mothers; we need to consider that they were also engaged into something larger than the family sphere. A great number of them were working as volunteers to open libraries in poor school districts, to make people conscious about the danger of nuclear bombs, to organize museum visits for school classes and, most importantly, many took sides with black anti-segregationist groups and joined the civil rights movement.

At the time when American culture and society combined to produce the ideal of the "perfect woman" as housewife and mother, these women were not completely satisfied with their lots. In volunteer and creative work, they tried to find a way to fill up a sense of existential vacuum that domestic life couldn't satisfy.

It is central to recognize that women were not only responsible for the family's wellbeing and for domestic organization; their contribution to society expanded beyond house limits. Women's role at the time should not only be seen as housewives and perfect mothers, but also as active individuals who played a vital part in the construction of cultural life and of social activism in the fifties.

The *Ladies' Home Journal's* slogan during the decade was "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman", a slogan that showed how women wanted to be recognized as an active part of society, not only as mothers or housewives. At a time when it was almost impossible for them to have access to power and to recognition some great women succeeded in breaking the limits and to show that women's place was also outside of the household. They were a way to show society that women were not fulfilled with the role of the "perfect housewives" and that they were capable of achievements, especially in social and cultural fields, that would transform women's reality and ambitions.

Rosa Parks not only fought to have a place at a bus, but also called attention to the black movement and to its leader Martin Luther King Jr; political women like Senator

Margaret Chase Smith and Lillian Hellman struggled against McCarthyism; artists like Judy Holliday, Katharine Hepburn and Lauren Bacall refused to cooperate with the House Subcommittee on Un-American Activities to expand the “blacklist” of movie personalities.

A group of women social and cultural critics was active during all the decade: Betty Friedan and Jane Jacob published books that would make women wake up from their conformism; Eleanor Roosevelt remained a combatant journalist; Margaret Mead was making Americans aware of the importance and admiration given to women in other societies, and women writers, like Harriette Arnow, Kay Boyle and Tillie Olsen, were making people rethink the values of the time and showing them that the cultural production of the 1950’s was not limited to domestic, cook and beauty related themes.

These women showed that, according to Kaledin, “an important value of this group of dissidents was their acceptance of femininity as a positive force in the world” (Kaledin 1984: 22) and that women’s role as mothers and housewives wasn’t exactly negative. Shirley Jackson showed the hard reality of mothers and at the same time the marvels of motherhood; even Sylvia Plath left aside her bitter writing to talk about her love for her cherished son Nick. The feminine presence was also felt in other creative fields: arts, photography, music (Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald), dancing, cinema (Shirley MacLaine, Audrey Hepburn, Ava Gardner, Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly...), television (Imogene Coca, Arlene Francis, Nanette Fabray, Audrey Meadows, Lucille Ball...).

Women were searching their places in a society led by men; they were finding ways to escape the stereotypes by redefining roles and professions barriers to become a force of action and no longer simple spectators. Even with all the national efforts to maintain women in their housewife role, a great many of them were finding in work (by necessity or by option) a way to fulfill a life that couldn’t be completed only by family life.

W. Chafe affirms that “In 1960 twice as many women were at work as in 1940 and 40 percent of all women over sixteen held a job. Female employment was increasing at a rate four times faster than that of men. The median age of women workers had risen to forty-one, and the proportion of wives at work had doubled from 15 percent in 1940 to

30 percent in 1960". Since the majority of these women were part-time workers, this visibly demonstrates that the house and the family were priorities, but not their only concern.

Women were represented in almost every 446 professions listed by the 1955 census, but very few of them had important or leading positions, most of them were doing jobs that men didn't want to do or that were qualified as "women's occupations". Women were considered tolerant, meticulous and calm, having a woman at an office would make work more pleasant and satisfactory. The myth that women were unreliable and that they would quit their jobs for motherhood was more and more distant. However, they continued to earn about a third less than men.

One of the main transformations experienced by working women was the new image that they had of themselves: they saw that they could be independent and that made them increasingly confident in their capacities as women and as professionals. Besides, their salaries were sending their children to ballet and football class, to summer camp or buying the new domestic appliances that families saw on TV; families had much more options than if only one parent was working.

I had a wonderful job. I worked for a big model agency in Manhattan. [...] I took the train up to Fifty-seventh where the office was. When I got on the subway to go to work, it was like traveling into another world. Oh, the shops were beautiful, we had Bergdorf's, Bendel's, Bonwit's, DePinna. The women wore hats and gloves. Another world. At home, it was cooking, cleaning, taking care of the kids, going to PTA, Girl Scouts. But when I got into the office, everything was different, I was different. [...] Even the days when I was home, it wasn't so tedious because I had a release, an escape valve the other days. I had something to look forward to. (Harvey, 2002: 135)

Therefore one of the main discussions of the decade was if children of working mothers were happier and more responsible than those whose mothers stayed at home. After long studies and observations, it was indicated that children who stayed part of the day without their mothers were much more independent and prepared for life than those who were all day long with their mothers, who attempted to comply with their desires.

After the Second World War, women's capacities and opportunities were increasingly established, so as the acceptance of American men's domesticity. According to Margaret Mead:

The new middle-class family is a cooperative, too self-centered unit where the father was as much a part of the home as the mother.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that work was something for women to "fall back on" was extremely widespread and presumed that work was something a woman would do if necessary. However, this proposition ignored the fact that most women worked because their salaries were necessary to support their families' needs. In reality, the kind of women that worked drastically changed after the war: before it the majority of women that were a part of the working force were young and single. However, after 1945 the female work force was twice as big and the majority of these women were housewives.

If white middle-class women could have the choice to work or to stay home, black women worked outside the home by extreme necessity. In fact, in 1950 57% of black women worked outside the house, while white women doing the same were only 37%. A great number of black women were employed as servants, the fact of being a woman with black skin made even harder to find a decent job. B. Harvey illustrates black women harsh work conditions through the life of a very strong young black woman from Arkansas:

Now this woman didn't want me to work but two hours a day, but she wanted me to do everything in two hours. And I tried to do it. And one day, I had just finished work and was walking down the street and this Italian woman called me: 'hey, little colored girl'- you know, I was twenty years old- 'hey, would you come to the fence?' [...] So I walked up to the fence and this woman asked me would I like to work for her the rest of the day. And she had four sisters who wanted someone to work, too. I wasn't making any more than \$ 3.00 a day, and I had to pay my carfare out of that. So when this lady told me she would give me \$ 6.50 a day and carfare included, I jumped at the chance. That was good money. (Harvey, 2002: 139)

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, 7 December 1958; Mead, *New York Times*, 16 November 1956.

When millions of women were forced to leave the work force after the war they didn't actually stop working, they were rerouted into clerical, sales and service jobs such as teachers, nurses, salesgirls and secretaries. This high level of the well-planned idea of "togetherness" was considered one of the main causes of divorce at the time; however, the situation where both parents were equally responsible and active in the household work was much more idealistic than real.

Even if women were becoming gradually more involved and present in the work force, even if many of them had proved that women were capable of amazing accomplishments and managed to begin a cultural and social transformation on the 1950's mentality about women, femininity was still seen as a concept that would help America establish the stereotype of the "perfect family life".

Even with these changes in women's roles, Americans did not think the positions or the responsibilities which were allotted to women could be important and thus, this feminine participation in the working world was not recognized as a real evolution. Therefore, the efforts for the return of the traditional woman were increasingly present in the daily life of families. Magazines, television series, commercials and radio programs were the fastest ways to pass this idea on to women; the image of the ideal housewife and mother was diffused everywhere.

It was as if society refused to see the changes which women started to live. As if the whole nation lived in a constant effort to believe that women were still the same ones, always satisfied of being the "perfect" housewife and mother.

## **1.2. Building the ideology of the "ideal woman" as "housewife"**

The desire to have a "perfect" family was shared by most women, in the 1950's as nowadays. A family without fights, where the children are happy and healthy and the parents are in perfect harmony.

In the United States of the 1950's the image of the "ideal" family was that of the successful husband, of the children running in the garden or watching the brand-new television set and, above all, of the wife cooking in her highly-equipped kitchen, doing

the laundry in the most modern washing machine and cleaning the house with her extremely powerful vacuum cleaner while wearing high heels and pearls and with an intact hairstyle.

The American women of the middle class thus had all the facilities and conveniences of the time. However, they did not have much to do, since with all the new technologies the domestic work was much easier and faster. To pass the time they used to organize groups and meetings and between a cup of tea or a piece of cake, women talked for hours and hours while children were at school and husbands at the office.

This model of society based on the strong distinction between the masculine and feminine roles was clearly conceived by the government and propagated by the means of communication of the time. The diffusion of this ideology, called by B. Friedan the “feminine mystique”, was one of the principal missions of the women’s magazines of the 1950’s, as well as television broadcasts, radio’s programs and commercials. In her famous work, B. Friedan writes:

The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and female; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only passion, the only pursuit, the only goal has woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man. It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? In the magazine image, women do no work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep a man. (Friedan, 1997: 82)

### **1.2.1. Women’s Magazines and Advertisements**

According to Nancy A. Walker the feminine magazines of the time dealt with domestic themes, all that was related to the family life and how to make it more pleasant: social and family relations, well-being, purchases for the house, activities for the children, schools and neighborhoods, recipes, health, instructions for hairstyle, make-up and for personal appearance:

Thus Vogue primarily addressed fashion and upper-class social interaction, whereas Good Housekeeping focused on the practicalities of middle-class homemaking; Mademoiselle, with its audience of college-age young women, was concerned with education, appearance and social life; and Ladies' Home Newspaper presented perhaps the most various and understanding of domestic life. (Walker, 2000: 8)

Magazines were one of the best ways to promote this ideology of the “perfect” woman; all households had one or more magazines per week. Millions of women used to buy their favorite publications to find new recipes, tips for cleaning the house, to discover the latest model of electronic equipment available or simply to read a love story.

A typical publication of the time is exemplified by the edition of July 1960 of McCall's magazine. Its contents were:

- an article on “increasing baldness in women”
- a poem named “A boy is a boy”
- the history of a girl who meets the man of her life
- a story on a young married couple who sleeps in separate rooms after a disagreement over gambling in Las Vegas
- an article on how to defeat the complex of inferiority
- six pages of fashion pictures
- four pages on how to have the same physical shape as supermodels
- an article on how to find a second husband
- an article on easy ways to make a successful barbecue

The rise of this mass culture was shaped by the national media, by Hollywood, by advertisers and, particularly, by the government. Even if reading a magazine that millions of other women were also reading was a passive act, its intentions were much wider: feminine magazines concurrently encouraged certain forms of behaviors, such as baking a cake, choosing a new brand of soup, refusing a professional opportunity to stay at home or even choosing a candidate for the next elections.

While one of the functions of the women's magazines was always to provide instructions, from how to cook to how to better raise your children, the nature of the lessons, of who taught them and of the readers had radically changed since the 1920's. In the 1920's, for example, the *Ladies Home Journal* published an article about the writers that were developing American literature; in 1932 *Woman's Home Companion* included an article about the major issues of that year's presidential campaign.

By the 1950's, however, such cultural and political subjects were replaced by marital advice by psychologists, recipes for dinner parties and decoration tips. Rather than developing this middle-class domestic culture based on the "togetherness" concept, the feminine magazines of the earlier decades tended to encourage individual social aspiration and self-development. In the April 1923 *Journal*, the editor, Barton W. Currie, wrote about a U.S. Department of Labor-sponsored conference on working women: "It is a pretty fine thing to contemplate this upbuilding of a feminine democracy where all women wish to be workers together".

Facilitating such encouragement of women's participation on the work force was a general idea that the routine of housework had advanced to a point that domestic chores were now extremely easier and faster to accomplish so that now women had the time to work outside the house and take care of their families at the same time. In the August 1930 edition of *Delineator* magazine, home economist Grace L. Pennock declared that the constant launching of "some new household product that indicates progress, saves time and effort in the routine of housework, and serves to point out how rapidly our standards of living are changing" .

Advertisement in the 1920's and 1930's tended to emphasize readers' individual liberty to make their own choices. Even if ads for beauty supplies, baby products and household cleaners appealed to women's need to look attractive and to have a "perfect" house, some products and services were targeted to an independent and autonomous public. An advertisement for Piggly Wiggly stores in the June 1929 *Ladies' Home Journal* included the passage: "At least women are free to make *their own* decisions when they want to buy foods... Here women choose for themselves – help themselves."

Whereas in the 1940's and 1950's advertisements for household products tended to picture women using the products, in the earlier decades the focus was on the product itself. Campbell's soup, which became an icon of the consumer society, was represented in the April 1934 *Woman's Home Companion* by a drawing of a simple bowl of hot soup, while in the 1950's Campbell's soup was symbolized by an aproned and beautiful woman serving her picture-perfect family. An Oldsmobile ad in the April 1934 issue of *Companion* shows a woman driving a four-door sedan as the neighbors look on admiringly, the text goes: "Women who love a fine motor car will find in this Buick seven-passenger Sedan the power, the safety, comfort and beauty they so deeply desire". By the midcentury, automobile advertisements were completely absent from women's magazine, even if cars were an extremely important aspect of the suburb's lifestyle shared by many great women in America. Conventionally, men were considered to be responsible for these domestic purchasing decisions.

M. Kammen analyses the importance of these advertisements for the comprehension of the postwar culture:

These humbler adjuncts to literature [advertisements] may prove more valuable for the future historian than the editorial contents of large magazines. In them we may trace our sociological history, the rise and fall of fads and crazes, changing interests and tastes, in food, clothes, amusements and vices, a panorama of life as it was lived, more informing than old diaries or crumbling tombstones. (Kammen, 1999: 198)

Nancy Walker continues to explain the importance of advertisements and of household products for a better understanding of the 1950's cultural evolution:

As Campbell'soup, Bisquick, Knox Gelatine, and Spam became ubiquitous, influencing both cooking methods and the American diet, so electric mixers and refrigerators reflected tastes and shopping habits; the increased centrality of the home both encouraged and was encouraged by easily replicated designs for suburban houses and mass-marketed materials with which to build and furnish them. People finally able to enjoy home ownership and a measure of economic security regarded the resulting tendency to conformity, severely criticized by sociologists at the time as well as more recently, as achievement of the American Dream. (Walker, 2000: 8)

To some extent, the midcentury women's magazines represented a culmination of tendencies that began much earlier. As a matter of fact, much of what can be observed

in the magazines during the 1950's originated during the earlier decades of the twentieth century; the debate about women's place in society, about domesticity and about the role of home and family in personal and national life was already present in publications of that time. The identification of women as household consumers was well under way and the advertising industry developed during this period the culture of ads for household goods, such as food, clothes, decoration and fashion advice.

But America's entry into World War II in 1941 brought great changes in the lives of men and women of the time. The most profound and highly publicized alteration was the entry of a great number of women into the work force – or war-related work – crystallized by the popular image of Rosie the Riveter. What made this change so significant was the fact that women were no longer limited to the household world and that they could actively participate of this new era where women's "natural role" as mother and housewife was replaced by their "patriotic duty" of helping the War effort.

Even though the majority of American women did not participate in the War effort, those who did were the focus of much public attention. Women's magazines immediately reflected America's engagement in the war and women's responsibilities during this period were largely represented. By the beginning of 1942 issues were bristling with images of women in military and nursing uniforms and women who remained at home were also mentioned, now as contributors to the war effort through their volunteer work, frugality and through their cooperation with restrictions. Susan Hartmann comments on this debate about women's public and private roles:

Especially in the early years of the decade, media images of women were expansive, widening the range of acceptable female behavior, providing positive examples of unconventional women, and blurring traditional gender distinctions. (Hartmann, 1982: 189)

However, what really marks the difference between feminine magazines of the early decades and of the midcentury decades was the development of a national culture on a scale unprecedented in American History. Consumerism changed the lifestyle and the mentality of the nation; electronic media, along with household products, frozen and canned food played perhaps the largest role in this development, as millions of people

saw the same films and the same TV series, prepared the same recipes and cleaned their houses with the same products.

Roland Marchand in *Visions of Classlessness, Quests for Dominion* points to the decline of foreign-language publications and to the increase of homogeneity in clothing and in items like furniture, as Sears and Roebuck ceased publishing regional catalogs to develop a national mass production system. In *Where the Girls Are*, media expert Susan J. Douglas writes both as a scholar on American Media and as a young woman who lived during the postwar period and who was conscious of its impact on her:

My point is that this situation intensified with the particular array of media technology and outlets that interlocked in people's homes after World War II. It wasn't simply the sheer size and ubiquity of the media, although these, of course, were important. It was also the fact that the media themselves were going through a major transformation in how they regarded and marketed to their audiences that heightened, dramatically, the conditions in the images and messages they produced. Radio, TV, magazines, popular music, film- these were the mass media, predicated on the notion of a national unified market, and their raison d'être was to reach as many people as possible. (Douglas, 1994: 14)

Douglas continues on the impact of the media in women's life during the 1950's, as feminine magazines were producing a new market segment: teenage girls. The media gave young women a sense of identity as a distinct group and thus a form of power:

A sense of entitlement, and a sense of generational power [...] At the same time that the makers of Pixie Bands, Maybeline eyeliner, Breck shampoo, and Beach Blanket Bingo reinforced our roles as cute, airheaded girls, the mass media produced a teen girl popular culture of songs, movies, TV shows, and magazines that cultivated in us a highly self-conscious sense of importance, difference and even rebellion. Because young women became critically important economically, as a market, the suspicion began to percolate among them, over time, that they might be important culturally, and then politically, as a generation. (Douglas, 1994: 14)

The mass media's presentations of] middle-class, sexually repressed, white-bread norms and values there emerged a subculture, partly but not wholly led by young people, that included rock'n' roll, FM radio, 'beat' poetry and literature, and foreign films. (Douglas, 1994: 15)

N. Walker points out the importance of feminine magazines in the construction of a national definition on women's role in society and to solidify middle-class standards:

Although the magazines thus played a role in the creation of the domestic world well before 1940, the political need for a new American self-definition and a rising standard of living made this role both more insistent and more vexed after that point. A survey of the magazines' contents from 1940 until the late 1950's shows both an expanding definition of the domestic –to include national holidays and psychological adjustment- and an increased emphasis on the possibility of improvement in all areas of life. (Walker, 2000: 31)

One can wonder why these magazines were so important and so largely present in women's lives during the first decades of the twentieth century. This can be attributed to several factors: the first one was the increased "professionalization" of the housework and the creation of a "domestic science" by the application of scientific principles to the duties of the housework with "efficiency" as the main purpose. Comparing home chores and industrial production was a way to assure women that they too could benefit in their jobs from the developments in science and technology. A second cause was the availability of products that should have facilitated the housewife's burden but didn't. As Helen Damon-Moore affirms in *Magazines for the Millions*:

As stoves replaced open fireplaces and products like flour were commercially produced, diets became more varied and cooking more complicated; as fabric was produced outside the home and paper patterns were made available for home use, wardrobes became more elaborated. (Damon-Moore, 1994: 22)

Damon-Moore notes a third phenomenon that increased women's need for magazine's advice and assistance: a decline in the mother-daughter tutoring relation that resulted in a larger gap between the experiences of one generation and another. Differences of minds and lifestyle led women to find new sources of advice and information in the printed homemaking literature.

In his introduction to the 1960 *Good Housekeeping Treasury*, Donald Elder affirms that many adult readers of women's magazines were first introduced to these publications during childhood, not only because the magazines had features designed for a younger public, but also because it was a way to show young people what life could and should be: "a whole fascinating world of fiction, illustrations, cover paintings, advertisements with pictures of houses, appetizing food, intriguing gadgets, far-off-places, healthy

babies in great numbers – there is hardly any childhood world comparable to it except that of mail-order catalogue or a well-stocked attic” (13).

He also suggests an interesting fusion of the past and future: “the well-stocked attic” representing what had been saved by previous generations and the “mail-order catalog offered consumer goods for tomorrow. In a very authentic way, women’s magazines offered both a nostalgia for the past and a hope for the future. The perception of the “home” as a safe and sacred place, as the fountainhead of all social and cultural life was a constant representation in the magazines, in fact, by the end of the 1950’s the image of the idealized suburban family entered the realm of international politics.

Women’s world was limited to the family life, to their body and appearance, to their husband’s wills, to the children, the house and the activities in their neighborhood. Magazines were a way of having women's lives revolve more and more around their households only.

No references about the important events of the time, such as Fidel Castro’s revolution in Cuba, men's efforts to explore space, the plane that broke the sound barrier, the fight of Afro-Americans for extended social rights... These publications guaranteed the idea that the only duty of women was to take care of their families and thus to optimize their femininity.

*Seventeen* magazine started educating its readers since their early age. In an article named “How to be a woman”, the magazine affirms that “being a woman is your career and you can’t escape it” and that “there is no office, lab, or stage that offers so many creative avenues or executive opportunities as that everyday place, the home... What profession offers the daily joy of turning out a delicious dinner, of converting a few yards of fabric, a pot of paint, and imagination into a new room? Of seeing a tired and unsure man at the end of a working day become a rested lord of his manor?” The ideology of the housewife was enforced by every possible means to limit women’s ambitions and opportunities.

Women who worked out of the house were considered “masculinized”, as someone who did not want a family life and who had chosen her career instead of the “true” female

mission: taking care of her house and spoiling her family. At the time the idea of “togetherness” was one of the major characteristics of the society.

It was a concept that the nation needed for this organization based on the family, on the specific role of women as housewives and of men as husbands, responsible for their families. This concept of “togetherness” was widespread in all 1950’s magazines; the reinforcement of this idea was one of the most important missions of the feminine publications.

N. Walker analyses the impact of women’s magazines in the daily life of the housewife:

While the magazines continued their traditional role of providing advice on accomplishing specific tasks, such as cooking, sewing, and entertaining, a variety of “experts” addressed marital harmony, social adjustment, and even the role of the home in national security. Although at all the social- class levels the magazines addressed, marriage and motherhood were assumed to be central to the adult woman’s experience, there was little agreement on how she was properly to fulfill either role, and magazine advertising ran the gamut from presenting her as a lady of leisure and privilege to suggesting that she existed to serve her family and, by implication, the well-being of the nation as a whole [...] “togetherness” campaign stressed the entire family unit, not just the woman. (p.146)

Through articles, stories, advertisements and even through food recipes, editors tried to convey to housewives the need to build a harmonious life and an “ideal” family. Before the fifties the image of women was completely different. It was the time of the “new woman”, committed to social issues, with the world of work, who had a strong personality and for whom marriage was not the only goal. But that was when the editors of magazines were women, who developed and respected female emancipation.

When, in the 1950’s, women were replaced by men at the head of the magazines’ administration, the role and the image of women suffered a transition. It was the beginning of a time when women were seen as the “housewife”, the dedicated mother and the affectionate wife.

Commercials were also a way of promoting the ideology of the housewife. The new electric household appliances had their place in the magazines and on television, the advertisements represented women using the vacuum cleaner, running the washing

machine or cooking in a kitchen equipped with the most modern devices. It was the development of the consumer society.

Most women were happy, pleased to have all these facilities, their houses were impeccable and their families spoiled. Based on this picture, companies wanted to convey the message that thanks to their products life was going to be much easier and pleasant. It is possible to distinguish the real role of women in the consumer society: buy more and more products for the house.

### **1.2.2. Television**

Before the 1950's practically no one had a television, it was with the radio operators and newspapers that the news were broadcast and that families had fun. In 1947 was launched the mass production of the 7- inch TV and 170,000 sets were sold in a flash; at the end of the decade 3.1 million units had already been sold. The programs were limited, only afternoons and evenings and the pictures were in black in white. The favorite shows at the time were series, generally based on family life, "westerns", the ideal school or the ideal neighborhood.

In 1954, color television appeared and the number of TV series was quickly growing. "The Honeymooners", "Lassie", "Father Knows Best", "The adventures of Ozzy and Harriet", "I Love Lucy" and others conquered the public with stories of adventure, love and family life. Sundays were animated by family shows like "Disneyland" and "The Ed Sullivan Show".

The image of the housewife was still present. The heroines of TV series also had a mission in the construction of the ideology of the "perfect woman". At the same time when women had this idealized image, their sexual character was extremely widespread in the American society of the 1950's, when sexology studies started to interest the public with the research undertaken by Alfred Kinsey (Kinsey, 1953).

The art of the "pin up girls" was reinforced and the use of pictures of women in sexy positions became gradually widespread. The expression "better than cheesecake", popular at the time, translated all the magic of these women, they were seen as a

fantasy, a dream, quite different from the woman who remained at home: the pin-ups were not to marry, just to admire.

With perfect bodies, angel faces and tempting poses, these girls were the consolidation of the “ideal woman”, sensual, extremely feminine, but also adorable and adaptable. The pin-ups were on the magazines, on television, in advertisements, calendars, posters, newspapers. Quickly they personified the ideal of the American woman: self-assertive, daring and elegant.

### **1.3. The identity crisis of the “housewife” in the late 1950’s: looking for a new role in society**

B. Friedan evokes the crisis experienced by American women in the 1950’s:

I’ve tried everything women are supposed to do – hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbors, joining committees, running PTA teas. I can do it all, and I like it, but it doesn’t leave you anything to think about- any feeling of who you are. I never had any career ambitions. All I wanted was to get married and have four children. I love the kids and Bob and my house. There’s no problem you can even put a name to. But I’m desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I’m a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I? (Friedan, 1997: 64)

I ask myself why I’m so dissatisfied. I’ve got my health, fine children, a lovely new home, enough money. My husband has a real future as an electronics engineer. He doesn’t have any of these feelings. He says maybe I need a vacation; let’s go to New York for a weekend. But that isn’t it. I always had this idea we should do everything together. I can’t sit down and read a book alone. If the children are napping and I have one hour to myself I just walk through the house waiting for them to wake up. I don’t make a move until I know the rest of the crowd is going. It’s as if ever since you were a little girl, there’s always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents, or college, or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake up one morning and there’s nothing to look forward to. (Friedan, 1997: 65)

I seem to sleep so much. I don’t know why I should be so tired. This house isn’t nearly so hard to clean as the cold-water flat we had when I was working. The children are at school all day. It’s not the work. I just don’t feel alive. (Friedan, 1997: 65)

The main question is why all these intelligent women, who studied, who were capable of the greatest accomplishments, decided to remain at home and limit their worlds to the family life? The ideology of the “perfect housewife” kept women from developing all their potential and from knowing the world outside the house and the family.

The consequences of this “golden cage” were felt all over the country. An increasing number of frustrated and overpowered women were a threat to the image of perfection that this social ideology wanted to impose. Women no longer has an identity, they were lost between the dishes, diapers and their husbands. They were “the wife”, “the mother”, “the housewife”, their own identities were a reminiscence of the past, of a time when they knew who they were and what they wanted in life: a family, a “perfect” family.

This desperate search for a husband was every young woman's goal. After finding a husband and founding a family they could live the “American Dream”; but they no longer knew who they were, what they wanted or what they liked. Young women approaching adulthood were constantly submersed in this powerful inducement to early marriage, but their insecurity about themselves and about what they wanted in life was also a very important part of this premature decision.

They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted a professional career, higher education and political rights – the independence and opportunities feminists had fought for some decades earlier. Then American girls began to get married in high school, colleges built dormitories for married students: by the end of the fifties, the United States’ birthrate was overtaking India’s. Where once women had two children, now they were having four, five, six; women who once had careers were now making careers out of having babies and being the “perfect” housewife. On the subject of women’s isolation and on the ideal of the suburban family, Friedan insists:

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating 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 stationwagons

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. They changed the sheets on the beds twice a week instead of once, took the rug-hooking class in adult education, and pitied their poor frustrated mothers, who had dreamed of having a career. Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful home, 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 men to make the major decisions. They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: Housewife. (Friedan, 1997: 60)

In August 1953 two shocking news exploded in the American Press: the USSR had detonated a nuclear bomb and Dr. A. Kinsey's report on female sexuality. It seems absurd to give equal weight to these two events, but both news generated the same level of anxiety among the public. According to Kinsey and his staff, 62% of American women acknowledged masturbating, nearly 50% of them had sexual intercourse before marriage and 26% admitted to maintaining relations with other men than their husbands.

These revelations caused a major reaction in American society, especially because it demonstrated the difference between the ideals of sexual conduct and the behavior of real men and women. Even if Kinsey's report instigated objection and disapproval, it was an important way to accept women's sexuality; the very fact that female sexual behavior was a subject worth of scientific studies was remarkable in itself.

Kinsey's research created such a reaction because marriage was perceived as the only way to have an active sexual life, which was in reality an important part of what attracted so many young women to early marriages. The idea that sexual relations were extremely important for a couple's happiness was largely diffused and even scientists understood that an early and eroticized marriage was the only way to make married life work.

Sex was lousy at first. Well, we were both virgins, what do you expect? Neither of us knew a thing about what to do. I didn't have my first orgasm until we'd been married for several years. It was an accident- we sort of stumbled on my clitoris. Then once while Buddy was away on a business trip, he found some old book along the lines of *The Joy of Sex*, and underlined all these things and sent it up to me. That really helped us more than anything. That book, I remember one

time, we'd been out and he'd gone to take the baby-sitter home, I took my clothes off and put on his overcoat and when he came in the door I flashed open the coat and yelled, 'Voila!' So we were trying. (Harvey, 2002: 18)

### **1.3.1. The housewife's trap**

The distinction between the image promoted by the time's ideology and the feminine reality of the 1950's was so sharp that women started to think that they themselves were the problem, that they were trapped into something that they couldn't identify. Women were so used to eating what their families wanted to eat, to wearing what all their neighbors were wearing and doing what all other families were doing that they couldn't find themselves any longer; they were confused about their inner selves.

Cultural historians examining the mid-twentieth century have pointed out that the image of home and family as the only source of happiness and accomplishment was created during and after World War II to promote the "American Way of Life", vital to the government's international politics, against all external threats. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz notes that the idealization of the family during the mid-century decades:

Was not a culmination of a long tradition; instead, the emphasis on producing a whole world of satisfaction, amusement, and inventiveness within the nuclear family had no precedents. (Coontz, 1992: 27)

If the idealized home and family were indeed a construction rather than a natural evolution of a long tradition, who created this ideal? The question has no simple answer, a variety of elements, some easier to identify than others, converged during and after the War to create this idealized vision of what a family and a "home" should be: the discrepancy between the hard times of the Depression and the needs of the American Dream; wartime propaganda that represented home as a sacred place; the increased development of new household products; the growth of the suburbs; the threat of the Cold War and, as a result of all these forces, women's magazines became a lens through which numerous political, economic and cultural developments could be displayed for the home and family.

It was an identity crisis, but also a role crisis. The boredom that women resented made them question if this “perfect life” was really perfect, if the family life and the maintenance of the house were everything that they could have. Such discontentment among its readers made feminine magazines interested in this problem and that’s when *McCall’s* started to publish articles like “The Mother Who Ran Away” in 1956, and “Is Boredom Bad for You?” in 1957 and that *Redbook* started to speculate on “Why Young Mothers Are Always Tired” in 1959.

As Brett Harvey affirms, the housewife, mother of four and the ideal wife was almost childlike. Women didn’t feel the need to become more mature: they left their parents’ house for their husband’s house. They lived in a protected and limited world, a life in which the family had the central place.

Because of their growing dissatisfaction, women didn’t want to keep living like this: the crisis of the “ideal women” became a national issue and the need for an identity initiated the questioning of the feminine model. Therapists’ offices were filled with women who didn’t understand why they weren’t happy, why they weren’t satisfied waxing the kitchen floor or doing the family’s laundry. They were ashamed, feeling guilty and thinking that they were all alone in this situation. One day during tea time, a mother of two talks about her feelings to her neighbors and, to everybody's surprise, they realize that they all share the same feeling, the same sensation of unhappiness. On the growing number of women that were getting regular psychiatric help, the married ones were reported unhappy and unsatisfied, the unmarried ones were suffering from anxiety and depression. Strangely, a number of psychiatrists admitted that unmarried women were happier than married ones; suddenly the doors of the suburban houses were opened and they displayed a whole new image of these housewives, an image that opened a crack which let out a glimpse of a reality that became a national question.

The days of these women were extremely controlled and programmed, at night they were exhausted, bored and feeling that their days were always the same. The number of housewives that were on tranquilizers was increasing, therapists knew that there was something wrong with women, with the way the American woman was living, but they also didn’t know exactly what it was.

How I remember yearning for the moment when both my children would be in school for at least a few hours. All of us- I mean the women- took Dexedrine, and later Dexamil. My brother-in-law was a doctor and he used to supply us with Dexedrine and Seconal and Phenobarbital. This was to have enough energy to get through to the day. I didn't stop until the late sixties and I remember having terrible withdrawal symptoms. (Harvey, 2002: 125)

The impact of suburban life and of the "perfect housewife" model on women had been extensively analyzed by feminist thinkers, from Betty Friedan to Marilyn French<sup>2</sup>. Isolated in their limited and child-centered life, countless women were trying to find an escape; something that would make their world's larger than the family sphere. Some found a way to express their creativity through work, others found their answer in activities outside the house and some brought these activities to the house so they could combined personal pleasure and the family's needs.

Harvey illustrates this search for something that would fulfill women's need of being a real and useful person with real testimonies of that time:

After a while, I started trying to paint at night after the kids were asleep. You know, when you're kneading bread dough or hanging laundry up on the line, you feel you're somehow in the right place, that you're organically whole. [...] But if you try to paint a painting late at night when everybody's asleep, you feel the opposite, as if you're teetering on the edge of something. You feel you're in a place women don't go, that you oughtn't be here. [...] If I was ironing late at night, I never heard from Paul, but if I was late painting, he'd come roaring down with fire in his eye and tell me that I was ruining my health. (Harvey, 2002: 122)

I was feeling irritable and restless, so I started taking a writing class at Wellesley, and I took a religion class, too. And something started awakening in me that I had my own interests. Oh, I remember being so irritated with Ned because he had no idea about why I was doing this or what it meant it to me. He would say, oh that's wonderful, dear. Suddenly I felt this passion in this writing class. It was so exciting and I felt as if nobody understood what I was talking about. (Harvey, 2002: 123)

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<sup>2</sup> American author and feminist that marked the 1970's through her writing about women's condition in the 1950's and 1960's. She defended the idea that women's oppression was a part of a male-dominated world.

In her book *B.* Harvey describes a conversation that she had with a woman, Carol Freeman, who was a 1950's housewife with a big house and a successful husband, but couldn't feel completely happy and satisfied with her life:

But I have to be fair here. As dissatisfied as I was, and as restless, I remember so well this feeling we had at the time that the world was going to be your oyster. You were going to make money, your kids were going to go to good schools, everything was possible if you just did what you were supposed to do. The future was rosy. There was a tremendous feeling of optimism. You were working for good causes, you believed that politicians were, on the whole, honest. You believed in this idea of good government and you believed you could have a part of it through political activity. You canvassed, gave parties for people to meet your candidate, distributed potholders with your congressman's name on them- and you felt that there was actually a correlation between your actions and the results. Much as I say it was hateful, it was also hopeful. It was an innocent time. (Harvey, 2002: 127)

One of the reasons acknowledged by this society to explain the dissatisfaction women felt was Freud's theory of the "penis envy" (Freud, 1914) which affirms that women don't accept the idea that they don't have a penis and try to compensate this by attempting to be equal with men.

In the 1950's this idea was used to explain why so many women were working, why they were interested in a professional career in the same way men did, why they wanted to go to college and study subjects previously restricted to men and, in the specific case of the housewife, why they weren't happy taking care of the house and the family.

In a way this crisis was a turning point in women's lives, it was at this moment that they saw the need to grow up and become real, to leave the domestic world and look for new limits and aspirations. The American woman of the fifties was finally awaking from a long and well-planned unconsciousness. Perhaps witnessing the bravery of black women in the mid-1950's fighting against racial discrimination and the difficulties black people endured during all this period, helped many white women to confront all these social rules and ideals that reduced them to simple and limited housewives. In a society that promised so much, a woman's individual success was mainly a

consequence of a lucky destiny rather than any social commitment to help women fulfill their potential.

Even if white women lacked an organized and active movement during the fifties, some of them had already begun to turn themselves into feminist thinkers and writers. Women like Mary Eastwood of the Justice Department, Catherine East of the Women's Bureau, Dorothy Haener of the United Auto Workers and Betty Friedan of the National Organization for Women, were initiating the feminist movement of the 1960's. Fifties "feminism" was never so labeled; it was more a social ideal than an organized movement. Its vision of reform was that a change was possible in the workplace and that its redefinition would confer women a stronger equality with men. Margaret Mead declared in a 1956 speech that:

We can, if we wish, move away from the situation where it is perfectly clear what man does and what woman does. (...) We had already moved a little away from this single solution. And we can move farther.<sup>3</sup>

### **1.3.2. The need for a new role**

In a decade that E. Kaledin characterizes as "affluent, fabulous, crucial, fearful and wasteful", (Kaledin, 1984: 218), American society continued to diminish women into their roles as mothers and housewives; even if education was highly recommended to young women, its intention was never to develop a refined and competent generation. Instruction and sophistication were essential to find a good husband and to raise healthy and educated children. According to B. Friedan, the idea that intelligent and prepared women were presumed to stay home was an incredibly waste of talent. To ignore the complexity of 1950's women is to risk a more complex view of American feminism; if the society of that period reduced and did so little to reinforce women's strengths, their combat must be seen as a much important and stronger statement.

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<sup>3</sup> Mead, Cooper Union Speech published in *The Way of Women*, ed. J. E. Fairchild ( New York: Sheridan House, 1956), p. 23.

By 1962 the plight of the trapped American housewife had become a national issue: dozens of magazines, books, educational conferences and TV shows were devoted to the problem. However, many people still did not know that this problem was real, those who were facing it knew that all the cheering and kind words would not change a thing and that, in fact, they were somehow drowning the problem in unreality. A bitter feeling was beginning to be felt by American women: they were admired, envied, pitied, theorized until they were sick of it and no real solution was offered. They received all kinds of advice from the growing number of marriage therapists and psychiatrists, but no other road to fulfillment was offered: they had to adjust to their housewife role. Most did it and adjusted to their role and ignored the problem as long as they could: it was a giant mass of women that were suffering in silent.

It is no longer possible to ignore that voice, to dismiss the desperation of so many American women. This is not what being woman means, no matter what the experts say. For human suffering there is a reason; perhaps the reason has not been found because the right questions have not been asked, or pressed far enough. I do not accept the answer that there is no problem because American women have luxuries that women in other times and lands never dreamed of; part of the strange newness of the problem is that it cannot be understood in terms of age-old material problems of man; poverty, sickness, hunger, cold. The women who suffer this problem have a hunger that food cannot fill. It persists in women whose husbands are struggling internes and law clerks, or prosperous doctors and lawyers; in wives of workers and executives who make \$5,000 a year or \$50,000. It is not caused by lack of material advantages; it may not even be felt by women preoccupied with desperate problems of hunger, poverty or illness. And women who think it will be solved by more money, a bigger house, a second car, moving to a better suburb, often discover it gets worst. (Friedan, 1997: 71)

It was no longer possible to blame the problem on loss of femininity, to say that education and independence have made American women less feminine, even if therapists and scientists had pointed out that the explanation for women's frustration was the fact that they had become "unfeminine". But the problem could not be explained by this theory, since the majority of these women had lived their whole lives in the pursuit of the greatest feminine accomplishment: a perfect family and a beautiful house. They were very "feminine" women – in the usual sense – but they still suffered from the problem.

If the secret of feminine realization was to have children, the 1950's was the period when never so many women, with the freedom to choose, had so many children; if the answer was love, never had women searched for love with such determination. There was a great suspicion that the problem was related to sex, as wives expected their husbands to give them the satisfaction they needed, but this explanation was also not completely convincing. Could the problem be somehow related to the domestic routine of these women? They suffered from what doctors called the "housewife's fatigue". All the new technologies had made their houses modern and cleaner, but their unhappiness was growing every day.

This constant tiredness took so many women to doctors' offices, which aroused a real curiosity within the scientific community. The conclusion was that patients suffering from "housewife's fatigue", slept more than an adult needed to sleep – as much as ten hours a day and that the energy they used on housework did not drain their capacity. Scientists decided that the problem was certainly something else, boredom perhaps: some doctors advised their patients to go out of the house for a day, spend some hours in town, see a movie, go out with friends; others prescribed tranquilizers.

The double deception of this feminine ideal was caused by two phenomena: when a woman was deprived of a function in society at the level of her abilities, the more her housework, mother-work and wife-work expanded, the more she resisted finishing her chores, being without function at all; the time required to do the housework varied with the efforts demanded by the other activities, outside the home, women were committed to.

The simple theory that "Work Expands to Fill the Time Available for its completion" was first formulated by the Englishman C. Northcote Parkinson on the basis of his experience with administrative bureaucracy during the War. Parkinson's Law can easily be adapted to the reality of the 1950's American housewife: "Housewifery Expands to Fill the Time Available" or "Motherhood Expands to Fill the Time Available", or even "Sex Expands to Fill the Time Available". This seems to be the true clarification for the fact that even with all the time and labor-saving appliances, women spent more time on housework during the fifties than during the earlier decades. It seems to be also part of

the explanation for the national preoccupation with sex and love, and for the continued baby boom of the time.

It is clear that the real cause of women's frustration and, consequentially, of feminism, was the emptiness of the housewife's role. The major work and decisions of society were taking place outside the home and women felt the need, and fought for the right to participate in this work. If women had gone to use their newly-own education and find new identities and expectations, perhaps housewifery, motherhood, sexual love and family life would have taken simple supplementary places in their lives, just like cars and sports in men's lives. But when the idealized image of women sent them back home, housewifery had to expand into a full-time career. As this began to happen, each technological advance that was elaborated to free women from cooking, cleaning and washing, thus giving them more time for other purposes, instead imposed on them higher standards of work until housework not only expanded to fill the time available, but could hardly be done in the available time. With all their new appliances, the suburban and city housewives spent more time on housework than the busy farmer's wife.

Women who worked outside the house did the housekeeping, while the typical housewife spent sixty hours a week, in half the time. They continued to do all the homemaking activities for their families' well-being, cooking, cleaning, washing, but even with a thirty-five-hour work week on the job, their work week was only an hour and a half a day longer than the housewife's. If this strange phenomenon created so little reaction, that was due to the relative scarcity of such women. In reality, even with the growth of American population and the movement from that population from farm to city and with the parallel growth of industries and professions, in the first fifty years of the twentieth century the number of women who worked outside the home didn't increase noticeably.

Women who lived in cities were bored and restive, even with all the housework to do and children to take care of. As a result, the urge to move was imperative, and "for the children' sake", they were driven by their sense of emptiness to move to a spacious house in the suburbs. This new house took longer to clean, the shopping, the gardening

and the chauffeuring were so time-consuming that, for a while, the emptiness problem was solved. But when the decoration and the organization were finished, when the children were at school and when the family's place in the community was established, there was nothing else to look forward to. The empty feeling returned, women felt the need to redecorate the house, to wax the kitchen floor more often than necessary or to have another baby; diapering babies and cleaning houses made them so busy that they did not have time to think on this empty feeling anymore. In the cities or in the suburbs, the problem was common.

Women who came to the suburbs were looking for a "sanctuary", they were perfectly willing to accept and to enter these new communities and perfectly willing to fill their days with housewifery's chores. A many great deal of women were reluctant about taking serious community responsibility and the explanation was based on the fear of not spending enough time with their families because of these new responsibilities. The housewife who "didn't have time" to take serious responsibility in the community, like the woman who "didn't have the time" to pursue a professional career, avoided a serious commitment fear and dedicated all her time and efforts to the domestic routine until she was truly trapped. But the real basis of the problem was that the "housewife's trap" was an illusion, was not concrete, there were no true walls or doors that forced these women to stay. Just like the houses of the suburbs, there were no walls between the beautiful electronic kitchen and the rest of the house, the woman was constantly in contact with her children and she had no moment of intimacy for herself: she could forget her own identity in those noisy open-plan houses. The American housewife's dilemma was that she couldn't have the privacy to develop her interests and passions, but even if she had more time and space for her, she would not know what to do with it.

Because husbands and children, the older ones, were out of the house most of the day, women kept on having new babies, or found ways to make the trivia of housework itself important enough, necessary enough, hard enough to justify their very existence. Some women found the solution on compulsive overeating, others on drinking all day long, between domestic chores and children's activities. Obesity and alcoholism, as neuroses, have often been related to personality patterns that stem from childhood. But does this

explain why so many women, with such different minds and personalities, had the same empty and lifeless look? It must have been the sameness of their lives, the boredom of their days and the limits imposed by the housewife role that drove them to these escapes.

To do the work that you are capable of doing is the mark of maturity. It was not the demands of housework and children, or the absence of servants that kept American women from growing up to do the work they were responsible for. In early eras when servants were frequent, most of the middle-class women who hired them did not use their time to develop an active role in society; they stayed confined by “women’s role” to leisure, to organize the house and to pamper the family. It was the myth of feminine fulfillment that kept women from doing the work of which they were capable. It is normal that women who lived all their lives within this ideological feminine image were afraid of being on their own for the first time after marriage, of facing the real world and adapting to their new identities as housewives. Betty Friedan analyses this myth that influenced so many housewives to accept their limited and empty lives:

To live according to the feminine mystique depends on a reversal of history, a devaluation of human progress. To get women back into the home again, not like the Nazis, by ordering them there, but by “propaganda with a view to restoring woman’s sense of prestige and self-esteem as women, actual or potential mothers... women who live as women “meant that women had to resist own technological unemployment”. The canning plants and bakeries did not close down, but even the mystique makers felt the need to defend themselves against the question, “are we, in suggesting that women might, of their own volition, recapture some of their functions around the home, such as cooking, preserving and decorating, trying to turn back the clock of progress?” (Friedan, 1997: 358)

But could the sense of self in these women, who dedicated all their energy to work and achievement in the home, be truly developed by housework, that wasn’t really necessary and used many abilities, in a country and at a time when women could be finally free to move on to something else? It seemed wrong to the majority of American housewives to stay out of the world, not to use their full capacities and energy, and not to develop their abilities into something else than housewifery. Surely, there were many women who were happy as housewives, and some whose abilities were fully used in the

housewife role, but happiness is not the same thing as the aliveness of being an active part of the world, not only of the house; housework, no matter how expanded it was to fill the time available, could hardly use all the abilities and energy of a woman. Edith M. Stern evaluates in an article published in 1949 the American housewife's condition and was one of the few home-and-family experts who saw the real absurdity of the feminine ideal: most housework, the part that still takes the most time, "can be capably handled by an eight-year-old child":

The role of the housewife is, therefore, analogous to that of the president of a corporation who would not only determine policies make over-all plans but also spend the major part of his time and energy in such activities as sweeping the plant and oiling machines. Industry, of course, is too thrifty of the capacities of its personal to waste them in such fashion. The true satisfaction of "creating a home", the personal relationship with husband and children, the atmosphere of hospitality, serenity, culture, warmth, or security a woman gives to the home comes by way of her personality, not her broom, stove or dishpan. For a woman to get a rewarding sense of total creation by way of the multiple monotonous chores that are her daily lot would be as irrational as for an assembly line worker to rejoice that he had created an automobile because he tightened a bolt. It is difficult to see how clearing up after meals three times a day and making out marketing lists (3 lemons, 2 packages of soap powder, a can of soup), getting at the fuzz in the radiators with the hard rubber appliance of the vacuum cleaner, emptying wastebaskets and washing bathrooms floors day after day, week after week, year after year, add up to a sum total of anything except minutiae that laid end to end reach nowhere.<sup>4</sup>

To the great consternation of men, their wives suddenly became "experts", whose absolute superiority at home was impossible to compete with, even if certain husbands did a bit of housework evenings and weekends, and very hard to live with. Wives began to treat their husbands as servants or as the latest technological appliance. With instant lessons in home economics, marriage and family in women's magazines and Dr. Spock and Dr. Van de Velde's books side by side on the shelf; with all the time, abilities, energy and intelligence focused on husband, children and house, the young American housewife of the fifties began to dominate, in a very organized way, the family, even more completely than her mom decades earlier.

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<sup>4</sup> Stern, Edith M. "Women are Households Slaves", American Mercury, January, 1949.

These mothers had themselves become more infantile, because they were forced to seek gratification and fulfillment through children, they were incapable of finally separating themselves and their activities from the child's. Thus, it would seem, it was the child who supported and gave women a sense of happiness through these "symbiotic" relationships between 1950's housewives and their children. This dependency of the child and of the family's household was literally built into the feminine idealization of the period: it was a long process; it began in one generation, and continued into the next, roughly as follows:

- 1) By permitting girls to evade real commitments in school and the world, by the promise of magical fulfillment through marriage and family's life; this idealization of women ceased the development of their personalities and kept their growth at an infantile level.
- 2) The stronger her own infantilism and the weaker her conscience of self, the earlier the girl sought fulfillment as housewives and mothers and, the more exclusively she lived through her husband and children, and her own sense of herself became progressively weaker.
- 3) Since she couldn't find ways to grow, the mother, who clung to the childlike protection of the housewife role, suffered increasingly from several pathologies, both physiological and emotional. Her relationship with her children was also increasingly pathological, since the child was not able to develop her own independence: infantile mothers had even more infantile children.
- 4) The signs of this pathological retreat were more visible in boys, since even in childhood boys were expected to commit themselves to face reality, which the feminine idealization did not permit girls to do. Instead, girls were presumed to live through fantasies and dreams of a family life. Therefore, these expectations made boys grow toward a strong self and made girls the worst victims of this idealized vision of gender relations.

Andras Angyal, a psychiatrist, describes this process as a “neurotic evasion from growth”. According to him, there were two key methods of evading growth: “Noncommitment”, a man lives his life, school, job, marriage, going through the emotions without ever being committed to any action, he is “playing a role”, “going through emotions”. The other method of evading growth Angyal calls the method of “vicarious living”, it consists in a systematic denial and repression of one’s own personality, and an attempt to substitute to this personality an “idealized conception, a standard of absolute goodness by which ones tries to live, suppressing all those genuine impulses that are incompatible with the exaggerated and unrealistic standard, or simply taking the personality that is the popular cliché of the time.”

The most frequent manifestation of vicarious living is a particularly structured dependence on another person, which is often mistaken for love. Such extremely intense and tenacious attachments, however, lack all the essentials of genuine love – devotion, intuitive understanding, and delight in the being of the other person in his own right and in his own way. On the contrary, these attachments are extremely possessive and tend to deprive the partner of a “life of his own.”... The other person is needed not as someone to relate oneself to; he is needed for filling out one’s inner emptiness, one’s nothingness. This nothingness originally was only a phantasy, but with the persistent self-repression it approaches the state of being actual. All these attempts at gaining a substitute personality by vicarious living fail to free the person from a vague feeling of emptiness. The repression of genuine, spontaneous impulses leaves the person with a painful emotional vacuousness, almost with a sense of nonexistence... (Angyal, 1953: 358)

“Noncommitment” and “vicarious living”, Angyal concludes, “can be understood as attempted solutions to the conflict between the impulse to grow and the fear of facing new situations, but though they may temporarily lessen the pressure, they do not actually resolve the problem; their result, even if not their intent, is always an evasion of personal growth.” Noncommitment and vicarious living were, however, at the heart of the common definition of femininity; this was the way the women’s idealization taught girls to seek fulfillment and this was the way the majority of American women lived during the fifties. It is not surprising that the bodies and the minds of healthy women began to revolt as they tried to adjust to a role that diminished and limited women’s growth; their symptoms, which so intrigued doctors, were a sign that they could not

evade their own growth and validate their existence without a battle against the social and cultural system of the time.

During the 1950's, psychiatrists, analysts and doctors noted that the housewife's syndrome seemed to be become increasingly pathological; malaise, fatigue, nervousness, sleeping troubles were becoming heart attacks, suicides, bleeding ulcers, hypertension and other serious diseases. Emotional distress was becoming a psychotic breakdown. During the decade, a fantastic increase of "maternal psychoses" was apparent, suicidal depressions or hallucinations over childbirth were more and more in evidence. B. Friedan concludes by affirming that at one point "women have outgrown the housewife role", they couldn't go back into their limited and isolated world, they were ready to fight for their personalities, for their energy and, above all, for their lives.

All this seems terribly remote from the easy life of the American suburb housewife. But is her house in reality a comfortable concentration camp? Have not women who live in the image of the feminine mystique trapped themselves within the narrow walls of their homes? They have learned to "adjust" to their biological role. They have become dependent, passive; childlike; they have given up their adult frame of reference to live at the lower human level of food and things. The work they do does not require adult capabilities; it is endless, monotonous, unrewarding. American women are not; of course, being readied for mass extermination, but they are suffering a slow death of mind and spirit. Just as with the prisoners in the concentration camps, there are American women who have resisted that death, who have managed to retain a core of self, who have not lost touch with the outside world, who use their abilities to some creative purpose. They are women of spirit and intelligence who have refused to "adjust" as housewives. (Friedan, 1997: 425)

It is easy to understand the concrete reality that trapped American housewives during the 1950's, the continual demands of their time and attention. In reality, the chains that blinded and trapped women were in their own minds and spirits, as the feminine greatest triumph was considered to be family life and motherhood. They were chains based on mistaken ideals and conceptions, on stereotypes that induced American women to take unreal choices and to have an incomplete image of themselves.

It seems that the problem that tormented women in the fifties was not a loss of femininity or too much education, or the difficulties of domesticity. It was far more

important and bigger than society could ever consider, it was a problem that had been torturing American women, their husbands and children, and puzzling doctors and educators for years. It was a voice that said: “I want more than my husband and my children and my home”; it was a call for a national transformation, a call that would define the key to the future American culture and society.

## **2. The search for a new feminine ideal in the 1960's, from the newly emancipated American woman to the feminist**

### **2.1. "There's something missing": from women's individual crises to the collective awareness of their common condition**

"Easy to say", the woman inside the housewife's trap says, "but what can I do, alone in the house, with children yelling and the laundry to sort and no grandmother to babysit?" (Friedan, 1997: 463). It was easier to women to live through someone else than to look who they really were and what they wanted in life; it was frightening to realize that the answer to the question "Who I am?" was much more complex than "mother" and "housewife", but the more difficult thing to know was that the answer was inside themselves. They could spend years on the therapist's couch trying to adjust to their "feminine role" and looking for a way to be fulfilled with their roles as mothers and housewives, but the problem was still there; every hour, every day, they were still looking for their real aspirations and true personalities

When a society asks so little from women, as was the case in the fifties, every woman has to listen to her inner voice to find her identity and ways to develop it. She must create, out of her needs and abilities, a new life plan, appropriate to the family and home that have defined femininity in the past with something that will allow her to cultivate a new perception of herself and of her capacities, her capacities to be more than a housewife and a mother.

Women were starting to realize and to face the problem that had transformed their idealized lives into empty fantasies. But once they had faced it, without much real help from experts and therapists, many of these women asked themselves who they really were and started to find out their own answers. Once women began to see through the myths of the "feminine mystique" (Friedan, 1997) and realized that neither their husbands nor their children, nor the things in their houses, nor sex, nor being like all the other women, could give them happiness, the search for the solution was much easier than they had anticipated. B. Friedan talked to many women who lived this transition and, through their testimonies, it is possible to realize how the awareness of the problem and the search for a solution were unique for each woman.

I used to work so hard to maintain this beautiful picture of myself as a wife and mother. I had all of my children by natural childbirth. I breastfed them all. I got mad once at an older woman at a party when I said childbirth is the most important thing in life, the basic animal, and she said, 'Don't you want to be more than an animal?' You do want something more, only you don't know what it is. So you put even more into housekeeping. It's not challenging enough, just ironing dresses for your little girls, so you go in for ruffly dresses that need more ironing, and bake your own bread, and refuse to get a dishwasher. You think if you make a big enough challenge out of it, then somehow it will be satisfying. And still it wasn't. I couldn't seem to control this feeling that I wanted something more from life. So I went to a psychiatrist. He kept trying to make me enjoy being feminine, but it didn't help. And then I went to one who seemed to make me find out who I was, and forget about this beautiful feminine picture. I realized I was furious at myself, furious at my husband, because I'd left school. I can't think what I was trying to do with my life before, trying to fit some picture of an oldtime woman pioneer. I don't have to prove I'm a woman by sewing my own clothes. I am a woman, and I am myself, and I buy clothes and love them. I'm not such a darned patient, loving, perfect mother anymore. I don't change the kids' clothes top to bottom every day, and do more ruffles. But I seem to have more time to enjoy them. I don't spend much time on housework now, but it's done before my husband gets home. We bought a dishwasher. (Friedan, 1997: 465)

Lately, I've felt this need. I felt we simply had to have a bigger house, put on an addition, or move to a better neighborhood. I went on a frantic round of entertaining but that was like living for the interruption of your life. My husband thinks that being a good mother is the most important career there is. I think it's even more important than a career. But I don't think most women are all mothers I enjoy my kids, but I don't like spending all my time with them. I'm just not their age. I could make housework take up more of my time. But the floors don't need vacuuming more than twice a week. My mother swept them every day. I always wanted to play the violin. When I went to college, girls who took music seriously were peculiar. Suddenly, it was as if some voice inside me said, now is the time, you'll never get another chance. I felt embarrassed, practicing at forty. It exhausts me and hurts my shoulder, but it makes me feel at one with something larger than myself. The universe suddenly becomes real, and you're part of it. You feel as you really exist. (Friedan, 1997: 468)

It was difficult, painful, and could take perhaps long time for each woman to find her own answer. The first thing women did was to say "no" to this ideal and traditional image of the housewife that characterized the decade. Nevertheless, this didn't mean that they had to leave their families and homes; they didn't have to choose between a marriage and a career, one of the most common mistakes of the feminine idealization. The first step that women took in the direction of a new "ideal woman" was to accept

that housework was not a career and that it should be done as quickly and efficiently as possible. Once they stopped trying to turn cleaning, cooking, ironing and nursing into “something more”, they were free to say “no” to all other elements that shaped the stereotype of the housewife.

The second step, and perhaps the most difficult one, was to see marriage as it really was, wiping out the image of its over-glorification that was imposed by society. Generally women saw marriage and motherhood as the greatest fulfillment of their lives, but once they realized that they were always irritated with their children and husbands because family life was not enough, they began to use their abilities and interests with a purpose of their own. They did not only start to feel more “complete” and “alive”, but the way they felt about their family also improved; women were winning a battle against a whole ideology and against themselves.

One hour, one day, or even a weekend off from motherhood was not the solution to women’s problems; that “hour off”, recommended by therapists against the housewife’s fatigue, boredom and trapped feeling, assumed automatically that a woman was just a “housewife” and limited them to their maternal role. When people are fully busy in their jobs, they can enjoy “time off”, but for the housewives of the fifties this “time off” was not a magical relief or a time for themselves, it was a moment of guilty and of total boredom. They did not know what to do with their free time; without houses to clean, children to take care of and husbands to feed, they were lost. A woman who did not have a purpose of her own in society, a woman who couldn’t let herself think about the future because she had not developed a real identity, would continue to feel an emptiness in her life, no matter how many “hours off” she took. Women became aware of the need of thinking of themselves as human beings first, not only as mothers and housewives, and of having a life plan in terms of their own abilities and wishes, a commitment toward society that could be combined with their commitments with motherhood.

If you knock on any of these doors, how many women would you find whose abilities are being used? You’d find them drinking, or sitting around talking to other women and watching children play because they can’t bear to be alone, or watching TV or reading a book. Society hasn’t

caught up with women yet, hasn't found a way yet to use the skills and energies of women except to bear children. Over the last fifteen years, I think women have been running away from themselves. The reason the young ones have swallowed this feminine business is because they think if they go back and look for all their satisfactions in the home, it will be easier. But it won't be. Somewhere along the line a woman, if she is going to come to terms with herself, has to find herself as a person. (Friedan, 1997: 472)

The women who established a new life plan of their own could fulfill a commitment to profession and to marriage and motherhood with equal seriousness. They were what Betty Friedan called "mutations of the image of what American women could be" (Friedan, 1997: 509); because time was essential to organize their lives between a job that really interested them and housework, they often skipped the time-wasting, self-serving details of both housewifery and professional busywork. Whether they knew it or not, they were following a new life plan and disseminating a new image of what women could be. They had their babies before or after internship, if full-time help was not available in the children's early years; they gave up their jobs and took part-time posts that kept them moving in their profession; the doctors took clinical jobs close to home, the editors and writers started free-lancing. They did not consider themselves "lucky" to be housewives, they competed in society, they knew that marriage and motherhood were an essential part of life, but not the whole of it.

These women suffered and surmounted the "role crises" and the "identity crises" experienced by the majority of housewives during the decade. They had problems of course, but other kinds of problems: their husbands' resentment, in some of the cases, organize their pregnancies and work responsibilities, find good housekeepers and nurses and, most surprising, they had to take a lot of hostility from other women, those who weren't capable of challenging the feminine idealized image. It took extraordinary strength for women to pursue their own life plans and to fully develop their personalities within a society that did not expect it from them. However, unlike the trapped housewives whose troubles multiply with time, they faced their problems and moved on; they resisted the mass manipulations and the idealized image of women and did not give up, often painfully, their own values for the comfort and conformity, largely spread within American society. They knew who they were.

No woman who started her search for identity could be sure where it would take her, it was necessary to struggle, to be brave and passionate. The identity crises could not be solved by one generation for the next; in the changing world of the fifties it was necessary to establish solid changes within American society so the pattern of feminine idealization would not be replaced by another limited and diminished vision of women's role. Only after a considerable change in the American image of women, could young girls think of their future as fully developed and independent women, who did not have to beat themselves down to be feminine or to adjust to their housewife's role. They could finally be completely happy without living through their husbands and children, but their search for themselves had barely begun.

It wasn't possible to live any longer as just "housewives", but what were the alternatives? Women were facing a new challenge, how to find new patterns, a way out of the conflicts, whereby they could use their abilities in society and develop their identities without, at the same time, renouncing home, children, marriage and love. But a woman couldn't change social patterns by herself, a national effort was needed and, as Betty Friedan said "what we need is a political movement, a social movement like that of the blacks." (Friedan, 1997: 517).

The changes necessary to bring about the equality were, and still are, very revolutionary indeed. They involve a sex-role revolution for men and women which will restructure all our institutions: child rearing, education, marriage, the family, the architecture of the home, the practice of medicine, work, politics, the economy, religion, psychological theory, human sexuality, morality, and the very evolution of the race. I now see the women's movement for equality as simply the necessary first stage of a much larger sex-role revolution. (Friedan, 1997: 519)

## **2.2. The revival of a movement and the development of Egalitarian Feminism**

The exhortations that Betty Friedan addressed to American women in 1963, calling for their engagement in massive numbers in every field of the work force across the nation, were soon to be taken up by new official organizations charged with studying the status of woman in the United States. As early as 1961, President Kennedy had created a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, whose report, entitled "American Women", was the beginning of a new awareness of women's problems. However,

behind the façade of encouraging feminism, intentionally or not, there were hidden nonfeminist motivations: the political concern about the feminine vote, the desire to catch up with the Soviet Union (which had put its female work force to good use), and especially, the desire to stop the progress of the Equal Rights Amendment. According to Ginette Castro, “the federal government was launching an egalitarian movement, but for nonegalitarian reasons” (Castro, 1990: 18).

After the “American Women” report, still in 1963, the “Equal Pay Act” (EPA) was approved thanks to the actions of the “Women’s Bureau”, a U.S. Labor Bureau’s division charged with feminine issues. This law aimed at abolishing wage disparity based on sex, it established that:

No employer having employees subject to any provisions of this section [section 206 of title 29 of the United States Code] shall discriminate, within any establishment in which such employees are employed, between employees on the basis of sex by paying wages to employees in such establishment at a rate less than the rate at which he pays wages to employees of the opposite sex in such establishment for equal work on jobs[,] the performance of which requires equal skill, effort, and responsibility, and which are performed under similar working conditions, except where such payment is made pursuant to a seniority system; a merit system; a system which measures earnings by quantity or quality of production; or a differential based on any other factor other than sex [...] <sup>5</sup>

The main proposal of the EPA’s principle was to impose the idea that employees, men or women, who perform substantially equal work or jobs requiring equal skill, effort and responsibility, must be paid at the same level. However, the EPA’s consequences weren’t as important as the feminists had hoped for; sex discrimination continued to be largely prevalent within the work world. Nevertheless, the Equal Pay Act had a great impact in the feminist struggle, it linked the first feminists that fought for women’s political rights to the new wave of militants who promoted equality between sexes in all areas.

Clearly, the appeal for action launched by “American Women” called for the promotion of women through an extended educational campaign to stimulate the ambition of

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<sup>5</sup> < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equal\\_Pay\\_Act\\_of\\_1963](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equal_Pay_Act_of_1963) >

young girls and to encourage them to overcome the prejudices of their fathers and employers. A year after the adoption of the law requiring equal salaries for equal work, Congress added a clause to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the famous Title VII, which forbade all discrimination based on sex in the matter of employment in the private sector. Nonetheless, some members of the newly created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) refused to take seriously the complaints files charging sexual discrimination; the breaking point was reached in 1966, when the EEOC reaffirmed its refusal to recognize the illegality of employments advertising specifying sex.

As a response, in 1966 the National Organization for Women (NOW), led by Betty Friedan, was born. It was the first independent association within the American Women's Rights Movement, and the first that dared to claim the label "feminist" in its ideology and the first organization seriously committed to the combat against sex discrimination in all areas: social, political, economic and psychological. Its members created the "NOW Statement of Purpose", a declaration which affirmed that there was only a way for women to reach their full potential: by participating in society, by having their own voices in all the decisions that were shaping that society. For women to have full identity and freedom, they needed, more than never, economic independence. Breaking the barriers that had barred them from the status and professions recognized by society was only the first step; they needed to change the rules and the structures of the work world, of marriage, family and home. Only economic independence could enable women to marry for love, to leave a loveless and humiliating marriage or to plan their lives as they wanted to. However, the importance of work for American women went beyond economics. According to NOW's egalitarian ideas, work was the only way to participate in the decisions of the industrial society of the sixties; women needed to have the training, the skills and, above all, the opportunities that came from participating in it. Women also had to confront their sexual nature; society had to be restructured in a way that birth control, safe abortion, the right to maternity leave and child-care centers would support feminine engagement in the "real world", outside the home.

For all those reasons, Betty Friedan, at a press conference in November 1966, specified that NOW wasn't simply a women's club, but a true organization for civil rights, engaged in a combat against sex and race discrimination. The militants organized themselves in different groups that worked on family issues, marriage issues, divorce issues and employment issues. In 1967 at the second NOW annual conference, Friedan proposed the Bill of Rights, a declaration that requested:

- paid maternity leave
- tax benefits to cover childcare expenses
- education help system
- free birth control
- legalization of the Equal Rights Amendment
- legal and safe abortion

At the same time, the feminist combat couldn't ignore the fact that "liberation" also implied the right to be a stay-at-home mom and a happy housewife; that was not what had to be changed. What had to be changed were the obsolete feminine and masculine role stereotypes that "dehumanized" sex and marriage. It was almost impossible for a couple to truly love each other as long as they kept playing those roles that had prevented them from being themselves. One by one, the official agencies charged with issues related to the status of women took position in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The most impressive conversion was that of the Women's Bureau, on its fiftieth anniversary; seven years after the signing of the law requiring equal pay for equal work, the second goal of postwar feminism, adoption of the ERA, appeared to be won.

Betty Friedan informed the government that NOW was organizing a massive protest march in Washington D.C.; however, this was just after the violence of Martin Luther King's march for the Civil Rights and Malcolm X's assassination. In order to avoid

another mass movement, in 1967 the government legalized a law against sex discrimination within the government and the public sectors and, in 1968, all sex specificity in employment advertisements were equally banned. A representative statement of the liberal feminist perspective is expressed by Betty Friedan in *It Changed My Life*, defining the ideology of NOW. Equality was perceived as a meaningful, complete equality, in every way. Thus, the women who wrote the NOW Statement of Purpose hoped to achieve “true equality for all women in America... a fully equal partnership of the sexes, ... in truly equal partnership with men”.<sup>6</sup>

According to Friedan, creativity and full participation in working life were the essential pathway that would lead to self-fulfillment. Following Friedan’s direction, the NOW Statement of Purpose and the NOW Bill of Rights asserted above all women’s full right to work, that is the right to all types of work and to all the benefits connected with this work. Both NOW texts were based on the realistic perception that, in a patriarchal society, the assertion of such a right was a hope for many women only if it was complemented with a demand for the right to be available: the physical and mental availability that was only possible if women weren’t constantly engaged with pregnancies and full-time child care responsibilities. Therefore the demand for child care centers and for the right to contraception and safe abortion was crucial. With this last demand, the NOW Bill of Rights did not fail to arouse intense controversy. G. Castro evaluates NOW’s combat for the right to contraception and abortion:

From 1969, for Betty Friedan, the right to abortion and contraception appeared as ‘a civil right of women’, ‘an inalienable right’. The notion of inalienability is taken here in all its senses; it implies for women the power of self-determination, that is, control of their reproductive capacity. Refusing them this right, according to Friedan, constitutes permanent rape and maintains them in their status of sexual objects. The question of contraception and abortion thus goes beyond the framework of political opportunity; it poses the essential problem of women’s dignity and identity. What is more, for the author of *It Changed My Life*, the self-determination of women in this area is the necessary prerequisite for love and the sexual revolution: for love, because it will mean an end to the fear of pregnancy that inhibits women in their sexual activity and inspires them to secret resentment against the partner; for the sexual revolution, because an

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<sup>6</sup> NOW Statement of Purpose, *ibid.* 87.

end to the dehumanization of women into sexual objects and their emergence as strong, independent people will free men from a monopoly on force, liberating them from identification with the alienating image of virility. (Castro, 1990: 47)

Absolute and indivisible rights, and faith in work were expressed in the Statement of Purpose and in the Bill of Rights and joined path with the spirit of the American egalitarian tradition. This tradition was constantly used by liberal feminists in order to emphasize the defects in the words of the Constitution when they proclaimed the necessity for an Equal Rights Amendment. Such an amendment had become the symbol of full equality. Egalitarian feminist ideology vacillated constantly between the declaration of ultimate faith in the system and an accusation and a rejection of an imperfect and discriminatory reality. The reformism of the egalitarian feminist movement is characterized by optimism and a great faith in evolution.

The main field on which equalitarian feminists concentrated their efforts, because of the priority they gave to the right to work, was the condition of women in employment. It is perhaps an exaggeration to say, as does the radical feminist Colette Price in her article *New Ways of Keeping Women Out of Paid Labor*, that liberal feminists were confusing cause and effect when they affirmed that women were oppressed because the system of employment was unjust to them. The most detailed study of employers' attitude toward women in America was written by Caroline Bird. *Born Female* examines the delicate stratagems of unadmitted sexual discrimination and reveals the existence of a whole system of rationalization of sex roles. According to Bird, during the fifties and sixties women's role in the work world was that of "cooperation" whereas men's role was that of "operating". She establishes three rules that based the employers' policy on the sexual frontier: women should work inside, behind the scenes, men should earn the money and the prestige, and the top of the pyramid should be a privileged place reserved to men.

At the same time, a new form of paternalism and underhanded sexual discrimination appeared: "new masculinism." The old masculinists, such as Freud, admitted only one place for women: the home. The "new masculinists", like David Riesman, Margaret Mead and Mary Bunting, did not assign a place to women. They were in favor of

women working, but not for their own glory, nor did they want women's work to change men's status and lives. For this reason, they invented the "U-shaped career" or the woman's career in three phases: an active phase after university studies; a less active or inactive phase during the years of motherhood; and a return phase of readapting to the working world after the children were out of the house. In fact, the real reason that pushed the "new masculinists" of the 1960's to support women's work was the lack of sufficient labor force.

The exorcism of myths, the struggle against a whole set of preconceived ideas, was another essential task of egalitarian feminists. The central myth, which created all other myths concerning women, was the "eternal feminine" concept. The symbol of the eternal woman, who was placed on a pedestal to neutralize individual abilities, to relegate women to a limited world, and to promote sexual discrimination, had become a standard of measurement for all women, and this is how generations of women's personalities had been confined to limited and diminutive feminine roles, that is, virgin, wife and mother. The time had come for the eternal feminine myth to die, and with it, all the myths about eternal women that served to control the place and the role of women in employment had also to be vanquished.

In 1970, Elizabeth Koontz, then director of the Women's Bureau, demolished the three myths about women and work: "women's place is in the home", "an increase of women working outside the home has led to a rise in juvenile delinquency", and finally, "working women have a history of absenteeism". The two first allegations were refuted by investigations undertaken by the Women's Bureau which revealed that the quality of time spent with children matters more than the quantity. As to women's absenteeism, the study demonstrated that women were absent from work only three-tenths of a percent (0.3%)<sup>7</sup> more often than men, and that the reasons of these absences were always linked to the role assigned to women: mother, wife and housewife.

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<sup>7</sup> According to: Castro, Ginette. 1990. *American Feminism: A Contemporary History*. Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques. P. 54.

Three other myths on women's work abilities were disproved, this time by a NOW militant, Marijean Suelzle: "women do not succeed as well as men", "women are less motivated than men", and "innate intellectual differences exist between the sexes". Surely, the sociologist admits, women earn many more master's degrees than doctorates. However, the reason for this is found in their choice of careers. Likewise, the idea that women are less motivated is a distortion of the reality; statistics from the University of Chicago reveal a very high level of motivation among women students. The fundamental reason that pushed them to abandon a career was the fear of social rejection for not conforming to the norm of femininity. As to innate intellectual differences, Marijean Suelzle refers to the work of the psychologist Eleanor Maccoby that demonstrates that cultural conditioning, more than genetic factors, intervene to explain the differences in behavior and performance between the sexes.

The ultimate myth denounced by egalitarian feminists was the one that consisted in denying that any problem existed, claiming that women were already in a position of power. Gloria Steinem clearly explains the point in the pages of *Ms*:

We are perceived as already powerful...There is still the conviction that women exercise some great behind-the-scenes power... We are said to be domineering or castrating... to be matriarchs. All these stereotypes come to mind: there is the pampered housewife, sitting at home in wall-to-wall comfort while her unfortunate husband works long hours to keep her that way. There are the lazy women getting a free ride on alimony...There are those grand figures of American mythology, the rich widows who are supposed to control most of the stock, and travel to Europe on the life insurance of some overworked spouse.<sup>8</sup>

The basic idea of egalitarian feminist ideology was thus to awaken a critical spirit in women, to urge them to question patterns that they had accepted for years without contestation. According to G. Castro, women have internalized the myths, a sort of vicious circle was established, the myths supported the facts and the facts confirmed the myths. It was not a question of blaming women for accepting their idealization, but the intention was to make women conscious of the damage their identities and capacities suffered. In *It Changed My Life*, B. Friedan calls "Aunt Toms" these women who

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<sup>8</sup> Steinem, Gloria, « If We're So Smart, Why Ain't We Rich? » *Ms*. 12 ( June 1973): p. 38.

attributed women's lack of success to women themselves and not to prejudices within the American system. Suffering from self-hatred by accepting the feminine stereotype, the "Aunt Toms" tended to resolve the problem by distinguishing themselves from other women and closing themselves from selective associations.

To demonstrate the creativity of women and that it was possible to transcend sexual split and political division, two names were constantly mentioned by egalitarian feminists at the end of the 1960's: Simone de Beauvoir and Indira Ghandi. In choosing two such different personalities, seeing one as outside the system and the other within it, egalitarian feminists meant to propose two possible versions of feminine power.

G. Castro analyzes the egalitarian feminist's solutions and its limits:

The usual objection is that the solution proposed by the egalitarian feminists can only be addressed to a minority of women, those who have what it takes to raise themselves up to the highest ranks of the social hierarchy. To make such an objection amounts to ignoring the fact, implicitly taken into account by egalitarian feminists, that men who rise to the highest ranks are not necessary exceptional. From the egalitarian perspective of sexual nondiscrimination, the same rule must be applied to women; it must no longer be demanded of a woman that she should be twice as gifted as a man in order to obtain the desired promotion. It must only be accepted that just as many women with average talents as men with average talents should achieve the summit. Such, it seems, is the vision of justice that inspires the egalitarian feminist approach to the problem of women and work. (Castro, 1990: 57)

"Our revolution is unique!", declared Betty Friedan, president of NOW, in 1968. Even if the emphasis in uniqueness implies the rejection of a separatist ideology copied from that of black power, the statement did proclaim a revolution. It was a revolution for all women. Following the same idea, Gloria Steinem held that the measures demanded by liberal egalitarian feminists, equal salaries, child care centers, refuges for battered women, legal abortion, were revolutionary, for two reasons: they freed women from their status as a cheap labor force and as sexual objects, and they freed women for their revolution. Integral sexual equality would lead to the most radical reorganization that American society had ever known, because it implied a reorganization of all institutions, from politics to marriage.

### 2.3. The Egalitarian Feminist Revolution

The egalitarian feminist utopia was based on the reorganization of four major institutions, aiming women's full participation in the active life of the country: education, family, work and home. According to the NOW Statement of Purpose, in an egalitarian society, education would be the key to women's natural insertion in society; the educational revolution thus, it was necessary to begin the educational revolution at university level with every academic community having a child care center and school for the children of the faculty members and the students. In the matter of parental and domestic responsibilities, in the egalitarian feminist society, there should no longer be any defined stereotyped role for women as "housewife" and for men as the "home provider". The housewife or the househusband would receive pay for their domestic work; this aspect of liberal feminism ideology was certainly one of the points which was most criticized by radical feminists who saw there another effective institutionalization of the limitation of women's role to domestic tasks. In this society dreamed of by egalitarian feminists, the right to work for women who no longer wanted to be just "housewives," would be guaranteed by the recognition of a right to be available. Women's availability would also be assured by the control of reproduction, with women themselves controlling their bodies.

Facing all these aspirations proposed by egalitarian feminists, Letty Cottin Pogrebin felt the need to state in her article "*Can Women Have It All?*"<sup>9</sup> that the women's movement had not encouraged women to demand everything, to demand the right to juggle at the three spheres of career, marriage and motherhood; it had simply shown them to exercise options. It was not a throwback to the days when women had to choose between a career and femininity. From then on, according to the egalitarian feminists, women would no longer be subjected to an ultimatum; with full knowledge of their options, they would be able to choose their possibilities with much more freedom and respect for their personal ambitions. This, however, was only possible with a redistribution of parental and domestic responsibilities. Revisions of the laws and institutions would not,

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<sup>9</sup> Pogrebin, Letty Cottin. "Can Women Have It All?", *Ms.* 6, no. 9 (March 1978): P. 47.

according to the egalitarian feminists, threaten the family as a unit. As Betty Friedan emphasized:

Everything we are doing in the women's movement, not only the specific reforms of marriage and divorce, but everything we are doing in the women's movement for equality, should make it possible for our daughters and our sons to have different and better marriages and families. (Friedan, 1998: 328)

Furthermore, as women came out of their homes, new jobs would be created in child care, laundries, restaurants, schools and other services. The egalitarian feminists expected the creation of community agencies employing true salaried professionals, both men and women. Finally, technology would open all professions to women, as physical strength would no longer always be necessary; this would mean the end of segregation in employment and the end of the relegation of women to the role of a reserve labor force.

The synthesis presented above summarizes the average position of the majority of liberal egalitarian feminists. This study would not be complete if it kept silent about the division and debates that eventually threatened the cohesion of NOW. The first point of contestation was the inclusion of the Equal Rights Amendment in the NOW Proclamation of 1967. Women union members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) opposed this inclusion because their union was against it; the union was not in favor of ERA because they defended a "protective" system that supposedly benefited the least-favored women. Although they suspended all activity with the feminist organization as soon as the ERA was included in its program, they nevertheless did not resign from it. The question of contraception and abortion was another cause of conflict within the militants of NOW. The inclusion of the right to contraception and to abortion in the movement's program shocked the conservative wing, whose members seceded and formed the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL). Focused on the economic and legal problems relating to education, WEAL has always struggled alongside with NOW on the employment issue and for the approval of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Betty Friedan, president of NOW, saw the divergences as symptoms of the movement's vulnerability. This vulnerability affected the movement in two ways: above all, it became an easy target for its adversaries; the desperate desire for power, hence the accusations of elitism, was naturally exploited by enemies of the Women's Movement, the agents of the FBI and the CIA, who infiltrated the ranks of feminism. According to Friedan, the tool used to discredit the movement was lesbianism, a traditional cliché used by so many men to intimidate new adherents. Within the movement, a lack of experience in holding power led certain militants to confuse militant power and personal power; some women saw themselves as the pioneers of the movement and used feminism for personal goals. The second problem was the lack of delegated power to some militants as spokeswomen, responsible for represent NOW and its ideas: famous feminists could present their personal points of view as those of the movement and say whatever they liked. Born out of powerlessness and lack of experience in holding power, internal disagreements thus are part of the pathology of oppression. Such is the explanation given by the black lawyer Florynce Kennedy<sup>10</sup> regarding the hostility of black women toward the Women's movement. As G. Castro summarizes:

Resolutely situating itself within the existing system, egalitarian feminism naturally finds its task made easier from a practical point of view. It is the form of feminism that, among the male public and government agencies, is the least embarrassing and the most accepted. (Castro, 1990: 65)

Another source of conflict was the 1960's experience of women students who were militant in the radical protest movement. They were fighting for social and political equality through their commitment to the fight of black civil rights and the protest movement against the Vietnam War, through such organizations as the Student's Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). But they very soon realized that there was a difference between the egalitarian rhetoric of their "brothers" in the struggle and the discriminatory actions of these men toward women: for the "brothers" there was glory and speechmaking, for the "sisters"

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<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, Florynce, in New York City Commission on Human Rights, *Women's Role in Contemporary Society*, P. 86.

there was obscurity and the dirty work. From then on, militant women understood that if they wanted to fight for women's issues, they would have to do it outside from the existing radical movement. Naomi Weisstein, Jo Freeman, Shulamith Firestone and many other women began meeting in Chicago, as they believed male radicals had excluded them from feminism, they caused a rupture with the political Left. Its consequences were analyzed by G. Castro:

This latter decision provoked a major schism in feminism, which I describe as separating the feminist radicals from the radical feminists. The feminist radicals- those whose primary loyalty remained with the Left- departed; the radical feminists- those who gave priority to feminism- went to found NOW. By doing so, the radical feminists took the second step likely to wrest women from the impasse of combat by proxy, by liberating feminism from the alienating and patronizing sponsorship of the socialist or socialist-oriented Left. (Castro, 1990: 21)

#### **2.4. The rise of Radicalism: “Women’s lib”**

At the end of the sixties, another feminist movement was created, a much more controversial and radical group. In June 1968, in their publication *Toward a Female Liberation Movement*, Beverly Jones and Judith Brown denounced male chauvinism, gave the struggle between the sexes priority over the struggle between the classes, and defended the idea that in order to fight the battles of others, one must first free oneself. That is how The Women's Liberation Movement was born. The militants of this movement still had to prove their political skills. While women's pacifist groups protested against the Vietnam War, the radical feminists endorsed the symbolic burial of traditional femininity symbols. They called on women to stop defining themselves in terms of their relationships with men, as they were being minimized by the patriarchal society; women needed to rediscover and define their own identities and act in unison. Thus was born the slogan “Sisterhood Is Powerful”. The burial of traditional femininity was the prototype for a series of shock actions that were carried out to provoke public awareness, and not “from motives of exhibitionism, as has been often claimed” as G. Castro affirms.

The movement grew and, in November 1968, two hundred radical feminists, who traveled from thirty-seven states and from Canada, gathered in Chicago to organize the

first National Convention of the Women's Liberation Movement. Two themes were at the center of the debates: sexuality, with a paper written by Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm"; and a new vision of the Women's Movement, planned out from a report by Kathie Sarachild, "Program for Feminist Consciousness-Raising." In her book, *American Feminism: a Contemporary History*, Ginette Castro examines these two documents' consequences in the construction of a radical feminist ideology:

Denying vaginal orgasm, said to be institutionalized by male as a self-defense mechanism to ensure his own sexual pleasure in heterosexuality and to subject the female erotic pleasure from reproducing, thus opened the way for women's sexual freedom. While the militants of the earlier Women's Rights movement had only talked about sexual discrimination, those of the Women's Liberation movement dared to speak of sexual oppression. As to the "Program for Feminist Consciousness-Raising", it aimed to awaken a sense of class consciousness in women. [...] Their method, which was also typical of other groups, involved gathering about fifteen women who would meet regularly for a period of about six months, during which time they would traverse four succeeding phases. In the first, each woman recounted her own life, experiences and expressed her feelings; this phase was based on giving political value to feelings, mutual trust, frankness and respect for each other's words. This was followed by a phase known as sharing, a sort of collage of the various experiences of the members, intended to reveal the collective aspect of the problem and to move from the personal to the political. At this point, during the third phase, analysis was brought into play, to define the causes and forms of oppression so as to arrive at an objective view of the condition of women in society. The last phase was thoroughly abstract, devoted to the development of feminist theory. (Castro, 1990, 22)

But what consciousness-raising did really bring to those who took part of it? First of all, it brought liberation through the word, women were no longer trapped into the "unsaid"; secondly, women who had had their consciousness raised saw themselves as the victims of a fundamental form of oppression: sexism. Sexist men do violence to the individuality of each woman, submitting her to a process of idealized feminization and transforming her into a "perfect" image of the feminine ideal. Following the example of Blacks who took pride in their color and showed off their racial and cultural characteristics, women in feminist discussion groups learned to take pride and to show their sex. An example was the women's collective in Boston whose consciousness-raising led them to become completely identified with their bodies, as witness their works, *Women and Their Bodies*, *Women and Our Bodies*, and, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

Their works were based on the idea defended by a French Feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne, who called it *féminitude*”, that is, to get each woman to explore her true life story; therefore, “womanliness” as distinct from femininity.

In reality, it is difficult to minimize the problems experienced by women to live out the revolutionary theories of the radical feminist movements. The first problem was the gap between women’s new identities and the restrictions imposed by a society that remained sexist; the second problem was the question of men’s oppression over women, a concept so intrinsic within American society that there was a kind of “mutual complicity” in it. Consciousness-raising has continued because of the perpetual nature of the issues involved. The first of these was the socioeconomic oppression of women, perceived at first as an injustice from an economic perspective, then as physiological alienation in the name of motherhood, and finally, as sexual discrimination against the entire socioeconomic class of women. The second issue that retained the attention of radical feminist thinkers was sexuality. Two theories toward sexuality developed: one focused on denouncing the repression of women’s sexual needs; the other orientation emphasized the way women had been alienated from themselves by the feminine idealization. The third issue pointed out by feminist thinkers was the cultural oppression of women. While Betty Friedan and the earlier Women’s Rights movement had proposed that the solution was a mass movement by women into the working world to free themselves from the idealized image of femininity, the theorists of the later Women’s Liberation movement laid down a precondition that women must first liberate themselves, through the process of consciousness-raising, to develop an ideology and an action program appropriate to a political movement.

G. Castro summarizes the importance of NOW and of the Women’s Liberation Movement for the construction of a real and organized reaction against all the limits and restrictions imposed by the 1950’s and 1960’s American society to women:

New Feminism, launched in 1966 as the Women’s Rights movement with the founding of NOW, and pursued from 1967 as the Women’s Liberation movement, operated on fertile ground: the psychological malaise of American women. This explains the movement’s initial resounding success, as evidenced by the national strike carried out by American women on 26 August 1970.

On that day, thousands of women refused to perform household duties, sometimes sexual duties, and participated in the largest women's demonstrations seen since the days of suffragists. With this highly political act, the new feminist movement came of age. (Castro, 1990: 25)

At the beginning of the seventies, the radical feminists of the Women's Liberation movement were one of the main interests of American media; spectacular feminist actions were being broadcast by TV shows and mentioned in journal articles. Some of these manifestations had a large space in the media and a strong impact in the social order of the time:

- the occupation of the *Ladies' Home Journal's* offices in March 1970. The militants were protesting against the work conditions at the journal, they required better salaries and a larger presence of "minorities" within the employees. In the August 1970 issue of the magazine an eight- page article was dedicated to "new feminism", advice on how to form consciousness-raising groups and how to combat sex discrimination.
- on August 26 1970 (as already seen) a national women's strike led by Betty Friedan that exceptionally increased the popularity of women's movements, especially that of NOW, even between radical young militants.
- on September 20 1973, millions of people watched the tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, a defender of the "manliness" idea. King's victory was a symbol and an encouragement for the "female pride".

When the radical label is applied to feminism, it covers at least three main tendencies: radical feminism, political lesbianism and feminist social radicalism. Radical feminism is without a doubt the most important of the three; this ideology has inspired a whole variety of small militant groups which set themselves apart from NOW by their absence of strong structure and by their exclusion of men. Although greatly diversified, they have at times been so widespread that they formed a real infrastructure and an effective communication network. The best-known of these radical movements were the New York Radical Women, Cell 16, and the Feminists, all founders of the radical segment of

the new feminism movement; the New York Radical Feminists and WITCH, a guerrilla action group.

The second tendency represented by the radical feminist movement was political lesbianism, applied to those lesbians who considered their sexual option as a conscious political choice, as opposed to the lesbian members of NOW, who had never declared their option as a feminist question. The lesbian contribution to the radical feminist movement was essentially based on the work of two groups, the Radicalesbians and the Furies. At the beginning of the seventies, a great debate on lesbianism divided the Women's Liberation Movement, placing heterosexuals in opposition to what some saw as virulent proselytizing by lesbians.

Finally, the third tendency defended by radical feminists was feminist socialist radicalism, which was characterized by a double adherence to the political left and to feminism. Spokeswomen for this tendency included minority women and members of the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), created from the old Socialist Workers party (SWP). The YSA emerged in the 1960's after the demise of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and, from 1969 on, its militants infiltrated feminist groups.

G. Castro defines radical feminism as:

For radical feminist theorists, sexism is at the very root of patriarchal institutions. Whereas the liberal or egalitarian feminist perception of society sees merely failures in a system that is fundamentally perfectible, the radical feminist views the system itself as the incarnation of sexism, with everything being organized around intersexual relations established on the basis of power. The radical feminist theorists therefore set out to demonstrate the institutional nature of every relationship, to study the institutions thus revealed, sex, social class, family, marriage, prostitution, love, culture, and to expose the ways in which these are all interconnected. This premise explains the organic way in which their arguments are structured, and the impression of great coherence in the theories of those who carry this reasoning to its ultimate development, Ti-Grace Atkinson being the classic example. This also explains their marked taste for definitions that enable them to delimit and describe concepts. (Castro, 1990: 67)

Kate Millet, (Millet, 1985[1970]) and Shulamith Firestone, (Firestone, 1970) in innovative books, were the first to attempt to define a revolutionary feminist theory, but

this concern on defining a feminist theory was characteristic of the great majority of the militants. Ti-Grace Atkinson, for example, perceived the development of a feminist theory as an indispensable prerequisite if the Women's movement pretended to become a political movement. The key word was precisely *political*, the relations between sexes and between women and society, everything was political according to the radical feminist ideology.

A new political approach was born, establishing a connection between the personal domain and the outside world. For Firestone, the feminist movement was the salvation of the entire radical movement since it linked emotions and intellect. In 1968, B. Jones and J. Brown insisted on the priority of finding the oppressor, and defined it as being male chauvinism, one of the period's characteristic. Following their lead, radical feminists deliberated about who was responsible for women's oppression and concluded that men were responsible for it and they came up with the Redstockings Manifesto:

We identify the agents of our oppression as men [...] All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc...) are extensions of male supremacy [...]. All men receive economic, sexual and psychological benefits from male supremacy. All men have oppressed women<sup>11</sup>

It appears important to understand that the radical feminist proposal that saw men as the "enemies" was aimed not at the individual man but rather at men collectively as an oppressor class. It was around this question that the "pro-woman" activists operated, they defended the idea that women were victims and exonerated them from blame. According to this theory, women were helpless victims and were held accountable for their own subjugation, to the degree that they were willing to accept it without questioning it. They needed to change men as a class. This "pro-woman" position was disturbing and could only create confusion and doubt within the militants, as feminist philosophy refused all personality narrowly defined in terms of sex. Facing this new ideology, militants were forced to choose between two irrational hypotheses: in the first, neither men nor women were the victims of their conditioning, and if women did not

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<sup>11</sup> Morgan, Robin. 1973. *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. New York, NY: Random House USA Inc. P. 534.

need to change, it was because men were naturally inferior and that women were naturally perfect or superior; in the second, both men and women were the products of their culture, which meant that women's superiority was a result of their conditioning, an idea that, paradoxically, justified the system that limited women to their assigned feminine role, thus, legitimating oppression.

Ti-Grace Atkinson presented a much more coherent position in her book *Amazon Odyssey*. According to her, identifying the oppressor meant not only discovering who was responsible for the oppression, but also how it operated. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the "pathology of oppression", a term used by both the radical feminists and the egalitarian feminists. For the egalitarian feminists, the pathology of oppression concerned only the oppressed women, who blamed society or some institution. For the radical feminists, there were two aspects to this pathology, one that affected men, who oppressed, and another one that affected women, who submitted. Atkinson went further by saying that the pathology of oppression was the result of the enormous gap between what the body can do and what the mind can imagine. She said that if the powers of the body and mind are in conflict, the individual can find comfort for this insecurity and frustration in exercising oppression over others:

This process absorbs the free will of the victim and destroys the evidence that the aggressor and the victim are the same. The principle of "metaphysical cannibalism" seemed to meet both needs of Man: to gain potency (power) and to vent frustration (hostility). (Atkinson, 1974: 59)

The feminist dilemma is that it is as women- or 'females' - that women are persecuted [...]. These individuals who are today defined as women must eradicate their own definition. Women must, in a certain sense, commit suicide. (Atkinson, 1974: 49)

As the victims of the same pathology, Ti-Grace claimed, men and women needed to free themselves from their predefined roles. "Metaphysical cannibalism" was a learned behavior, a form of mental disorder; thus, her rejection for men's elimination:

I believe that the sex roles - both male and female - must be destroyed, not the individuals who happen to possess either a penis or a vagina, or both, or neither. (Atkinson, 1974: 55)

Through the triple rejection of the traditional criteria of sexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality, the author summarily dismisses all sexist analysis, avoiding any contradiction that might exist between denouncing the Freudian slogan “Anatomy Is Destiny” and talking about a supposed genetic inferiority of men. In *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, Robin Morgan expressed a similar reasoning, while openly proclaiming her hatred of men. The series of justifications given by Morgan to explain her aversion is filled with “typically male” aggressions toward the Women’s movement, represented by homosexual men, socialist men or by the hippie culture. One may conclude that the radical feminist’s proposal “men are the enemy” was aimed at man not as human beings but as the incarnation of a behavior that had become a typical trace in American society.

The issue of sexuality had an essential place within the radical feminist struggle which sustained the idea that sexuality was the key element of the system they denounced. Responding to egalitarian feminists who did not understand why radical militants gave so much importance to sex, Ti-Grace Atkinson pointed out that society defined women by their sex and as sexual objects, so that the relation between feminism and sexuality was evident. The concern for bringing sex into the discussion had several purposes. Above all, it was important to break the silence that surrounded this subject; women’s sexuality remained taboo until the 1960’s. This debate gave birth to a new notion of feminine self-determination and redefined women’s sexuality: it affirmed women’s claims to sexual pleasure and personal freedom; and it negated the myth of the frigidity and inferiority of the female sex.

Sexuality in the 1960’s patriarchal society was perceived by Atkinson and the radical feminists as a political institution which still had the function of guaranteeing the survival of the species. For them, the institutionalization of sexuality was antifeminist because it did not take women’s real eroticism into account of. In addition, this perception of the relation between the sexes had inevitably limited women to their role as mothers and wives. In reality, radical feminism did not reject sexuality, as often assumed, they rejected the institutionalization of sex, as focused on reproduction and the denial of women’s right to orgasm.

As maintained by G. Castro, the system of sexual classes rose from the institutionalization of sexuality. Following the lead of S. Firestone, radical feminism pleaded for the idea of an all-inclusive system of sexual classes. According to the author, the feminine political class was not related to women's biological reproductive capacity, but rather to the feminine social function of reproducing, an imperative duty to society. In this way, women were the victims of a process of dehumanization and objectification; defined in terms of their function; they were no longer classified as humans but as functional objects. The notion of function occupied an important place in the radical feminist thought, for if the function of women within society was to reproduce, then procreation was perceived as the main impediment for women's freedom to work and to develop their inner capacities. It was in this necessary limitation that the patriarchal society of the 1950's and 1960's based its myths and its subjugation toward women.

The problem of women's control of their reproductive function was, as believed by radical feminists, indissoluble from the problem of sexual class; the body and the reproductive capacity were here evaluated in terms of property. The woman was seen as the responsible owner of her own body, she should have total liberty to exercise her choices. The social function of reproduction as conceived in the patriarchal society, that is, as a political purpose, and governed by abortion legislation, was seen as a refusal of women's liberty and as an oppressor. The radical militants joined, thus, the egalitarian feminists in the combat against the abortion laws, considered unconstitutional as they did not respect women's right to liberty and property of their own bodies. These laws had only one reason: to permit the patriarchy to perpetuate the idealization and the categorization of women as a sexual class.

Radical feminists were interested not only in the sexual implications of the notion of class, but also in the mentality it represented; the most complete contributions on this matter came from the lesbian group, the Furies. Rita Mae Brown<sup>12</sup>, one of the group's

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<sup>12</sup> Rita Mae Brown is an American writer, best known for her participation in the American Civil Rights Movement, Gay Liberation and the feminist movement. She took an administrative position within NOW, but angrily resigned in February 1970 over Betty Friedan's anti-gay remarks and NOW's attempts to

founders, denounced the inadequacy of the Marxist definition of class because it sees class only in terms of production; according to her, the term class implies a behavior, a set of ideas about life and a set of experiences that confirm these ideas. Even if, by their sex, women belong to the same sexual class, they don't all belong, by ties of marriage or family, to the same social class, whose ideas and behaviors are widely distinct. The different social classes within the movement became a problem for the unity of the groups; arrogance could be expressed as pity for their militant sisters' difficulties in public speeches and manifestations.

The family was perceived as the basic representation of the system of oppression. Kate Millet defines it as follows:

A patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole [...]. It effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient. As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of patriarchal society, the family and its roles are prototypical. (Millet, 1985: 33)

As a patriarchal unit, the family was seen as the site of a triple oppression for women: sexual, economic and psychological. First, as a site of sexual repression because it was essentially a reproductive cell, based on the women's ability to give birth; as an economic oppression toward women since the family was based on the division of labor – paid outside work for men and unpaid domestic work for women; and finally, as a site of a structured power, where the domination/submission scheme was a basic characteristic of the relation between sexes. The perception of the nuclear family as the center of the oppression system led to another discussion, in which marriage was seen as a, in Ti-Grace Atkinson's words, "sub-division within another institution". The debate on marriage aroused uncertainties among radical feminists, their explanations were complicated and not clear: marriage ought to be abolished, but not before replacement structures had been found for women. Their position was hardly more coherent than that of the egalitarian feminists who proclaimed, without recognizing the implication of it: "let's keep the institution but abolish its excesses."

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distance itself from lesbian organizations. She was one of the founding members of the lesbian group the Furies in the early 1970's.

It was inevitable that the debate about marriage led to a discussion on prostitution, since that was seen as a side-effect of marriage in the patriarchal society. The desire to change partners that men experienced was considered normal, but women's will to change was seen as illegitimate, thus, the wife had to be comprehensive and tolerant if she found out her husband was seeing a prostitute; after all, a prostitute was less threatening to her marriage than a mistress would be. For radical feminists, prostitution was an integral part of the patriarchal system, one of the tools used to make everything work as expected. Following Simone de Beauvoir's lead, Ti-Grace Atkinson recalls, in particular, the support given by the Christian religion to prostitution as a necessary evil whose suppression would lead to a complete breakdown of society. A creation of patriarchal men, as proclaimed by radical militants, prostitution was presented as the perfect example of a system based on "two weights, two measures", for it not only supported the double standard in marriage but also integrated it in its structure: although prostitution was a masculine demand, the responsibility was not attached to men, but to women.

Ironically evoking American traditional values, Atkinson denounced another aspect of the system "two weights, two measures", intrinsic to prostitution: financial success and social isolation. Evidently, the women who worked as prostitutes were financially successful; they gained much more than the average paid women. Nevertheless, in spite of their financial success, prostitutes were kept apart from the visible economy and forced to work in a hidden market. Prostitution, as the incarnation of the system of double standards, had a political function: for the men who used its services, it was an acquisition of power over women. It was this point that most distressed radical feminists, men were paying for women's souls, for the right to humiliate them. According to Ti-Grace Atkinson:

Prostitution is the specter of economic success for women: institutionalized rape in its most public, brutal form. (Atkinson, 1974: 124)

For Ginette Castro:

As a crime of the patriarchy, prostitution, like rape, is the quintessential expression of the class relationship existing between the sexes, and the key to all economic and political analysis of the categorization of women as a class". (Castro, 1990: 83)

Shulamith Firestone and Ti-Grace Atkinson insist on the necessity of debate on the issue of love, since they see it as a central facet of women's oppression system. According to the authors, love had a political function in the patriarchal society, it persuaded the oppressed, women in this case, to accept oppression; a women in love, says Atkinson in her drastic theory, can only be in a psychopathological state resulting from the man's exercising his prestigious power of magnetism over the woman deprived of her humanity:

The woman is drawn to –attracted by, desirous of-, in love with - the man. She is powerless, he is powerful. The woman is instinctively trying to recoup her definitional and political losses by fusing with the enemy. 'Love' is the woman's pitiful, deluded attempt to attain the human: by fusing, she hopes to blur the male female role dichotomy, and that a new division of the human class might prove more equitable. She counts on the illusion she has spun out of herself in order to be able to accept the fusion, to be transferred to the whole and, thus, that the new man will be garbed now equally in her original illusion. (Atkinson, 1974: 44)

From this analysis came the radical feminist idea that the feminist solution required the rejection of love; in that view, it could not be an amorous solution for women's problem, for a woman could not experience love without accepting her subordinated role. The position of Firestone is certainly more rational. For her, there were indeed happy couples which she defines as a situation of total emotional vulnerability in which the self seeks fulfillment in merging with the other, and vice versa. She said that this did not mean becoming incorporated in the other, but an exchange between two selves and mutual fulfillment; however, a happy couple's relation was rare, since for one happy experience, there were ten painful experiences of destruction. The author suggested that this destructive aspect of love had come from a conflict between the perceived self and the ideal self, from an idealized image of the self and of the other. In the American society of the time, she affirms, love was corrupt because it took place in a context of inequality, it was an unhealthy form of love in which the man placed the woman he

loved higher than all others in order to justify his own descent into the lower caste. By definition, she says, men are incapable of loving.

As for women, their feelings were also seen as perverted: women sought men's approval, emotional and economic security. Shulamith Firestone remarked the destructive effects suffered by the woman; seeking to resemble the ideal image that the man worshipped in her, she denied her real self without measuring the cost of the overpriced deception. Facing this theory, one question was obvious: would there still be idealization if the political context of love disappeared? Yes, in part, replied the author referring to the lover's perception in the beloved of qualities that other people do not see, however, she added, one cannot mistake passionate perception for idealization. G. Castro summarizes the radical, and sometimes misunderstood, perception of love proclaimed by radical feminist thinkers:

This is a particularly important conclusion, for radical feminism has often been lumped together and simplistically misinterpreted as a pure and simple rejection of love. [...]. Granted, there were proclamations of hate for all men. And certainly, even after recognizing that women, in their vulnerable situation, need love, Shulamith Firestone declared that men were not worth the trouble of being loved. But before jumping to hasty conclusions based on literal interpretations, it is important to resituate all these radical declarations within the context of the works in which they appear [...] doing so demonstrates that the term man is never taken in its strictly biological sense[...] but rather is loaded with sociological implications, leaving the door open for hope and change. (Castro, 1990: 85)

The relation between feminism and culture was profoundly analyzed in Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*; her book studies three main facets: the subculture of romantic sentimentalism, the artistic aspect of culture in the sixties and seventies, and the historical dialectic between the aesthetic and the technological mode of dealing with the world around us. The subculture of romantic sentimentalism, as spread by the media, was the main instrument for the socialization of women; for this reason, it increased proportionately with women's demands for liberation. It was organized around three central points: eroticism, "sex privatization", and the beauty ideal. Through the reinforcement of these three factors, romantic sentimentalism operated as a double denigration of women, who were represented by a fantasist and unrealistic image.

Eroticism was thus made a fundamental value, which maintained both the dependent status of women and the system of sexual classes. These two phenomena were likewise maintained by the second component of romantic sentimentalism, sex privatization.

The process is insidious. When a man exclaims, 'I love blondes!' all the secretaries in the vicinity sit up; they take it personally because they have been sex-privatized. The blonde one feels personally complimented because she has come to measure her worth through the physical attribute that differentiates her from other women. She no longer recalls that any physical attribute you could name is shared by many others, that these are accidental attributes not of her own creation, that her sexuality is shared by half of humanity. (Firestone, 1970: 142)

Hence, these women have become incapable of distinguishing their own individual personalities from their sex. Sex privatization is seen by Firestone as manipulation techniques used by men to blind women to their common interests as a class. Finally, the third component was the idealization of beauty, which drove all women to look alike. This standardization had a political function as well since it stereotyped women into a class with predictable reactions; same look, same ideas, same beliefs. About the beauty issue, Shulamith Firestone affirms that for radical feminists it was not a question of denying the beauty of a face in the cover of a magazine, but knowing if this beauty was individually appreciated or stereotypically produced. Likewise, she says, what was demanded was not the elimination of emotions, but rather its redistribution.

As for the artistic aspect of culture in the sixties and seventies, it was presented as the perfect representation of the patriarchal society in the sense that it replicated male supremacy. American culture was essentially male for two reasons: first, because of the love for women, as its "creative muses"; second, because women did not have the chance to see themselves culturally, through their own eyes. Culture at the time was a male-dominated domain that reflected a male-dominated society, perpetuated by the propaganda agent of it. According to S. Firestone, American society had been corrupted in order to perform a political mission; art was suffering a mutation: the sexual split had generated an inauthentic women's art and a corrupt men's art.

The same idea of a sexual schism is emphasized in Firestone's study of the historical dialectic of culture. The radical militant author therefore declared that the culture, as a

patriarchal institution, had been corrupted in the same way as all the others; she continued by affirming that the only solution for the sexual class problem was a radical feminist revolution.

## **2.5. The Radical Feminist Revolution**

According to the scheme traced by Firestone, the radical feminist revolution was to be organized in three phases: a sexual revolution, an economic revolution and, finally, a cultural revolution.

The sexual revolution would be the result of the feminist rebellion, whose militants would be joined by the young and ethnic minorities that suffered from age or race oppression. The feminist revolution, thus, posed the question of separatism, with the development of the notion of “sisterhood”; Ginette Castro defined it as:

Separatist radical feminism situates itself in a “space/time” (the two concepts cannot be disassociated) located outside the boundaries of the patriarchal space/time where the community of men is still living in Anno Domini (the year of our Lord). (Castro, 1990: 90)

It was a combat against male supremacy, “sisterhood” meant struggling against sexist institutions, whose collapse implied their replacement by other structures under women’s supervision. But how would radical feminists manage to destroy all existing institutions? No clear answer was given, but the militants believed in a national women’s movement and in the development of new mental attitudes that would facilitate the demolition of the old power structure. It was in this point that radical feminists differed from egalitarian feminists. They were not interested in the “power sharing” proposed by the egalitarian militants, they were demanding an all-out effort to uproot all domination and elitism in human relations; the true sexual revolution, for the radical feminists, was the one that would abolish the very notion of power.

Once that was accomplished, separatism needed to end. Once women had accomplished the sexual revolution in their primary concerns and established their new identities, they would be able to interact with men, individually and collectively. Separatism was supposed to last only through the phase of sexual revolution; it was to end so that the

next phases of economic and cultural revolution could continue. But what exactly should sexual revolution be, if the destruction of sexist institutions was to happen? For radical feminists, it should begin with the body, since it was through women's body and their reproductive capacity that men created the sexual class of women. To Shulamith Firestone, the sexual revolution must liberate women from the tyranny of their reproductive function, and gestation and child rearing must be shared throughout the whole of society, men and women. The author however, recognized the danger and the utopist character that such a solution represented in the American society of the seventies, governed by the psychology of power. The door could not be closed to innovations by pleading the excuse of an imperfect society; Firestone defends the solution of artificial reproduction as a way to guarantee a postrevolutionary future, when attitudes have changed and the notion of power have gained another meaning.

As for Ti-Grace Atkinson, she demands that the whole of society go back and face its responsibilities in the matter of childbirth. Men could no longer impose gestation to women; society, she said, should decide on the birthrate but it should leave women free to choose between gestation or not. This solution represented a total refusal to consider reproduction as a duty to society and the recognition of women's right to nonmotherhood. This suggestion offered an essentially political proposal: the destruction of the very foundations on which the categorization of women as a sexual class was based.

The sexual revolution also implied the destruction of the family in its role as the basic unit cell of economic and psychological oppression. It was necessary to abolish the division of labor and the economic dependence of women and children on which the ideal family was based, since this abolition was necessary to the end of oppression within the family sphere. At this point, the phase of cultural revolution could begin. The elimination of family as the basis of oppression was to be followed by the total integration of women and children into all sectors of society. When cultural distinctions between sexes and generations have been abolished within the family and the society, sexual repression would no longer have any reason to exist. Ti-Grace Atkinson says that the primary goal was to eliminate all institutional aspect of sex, a division between

sexuality and reproduction by turning to the method of “test-tube babies”, extra-uterine conception and artificial incubation. At this moment, she declares, sexual intercourse would then become simply a practice, deprived of institutional or political duties, that would affirm women’s sexuality.

During the economic phase of the revolution, according to the radical feminists, women were to leave behind their marginal status that had been necessary while they were developing a new identity and while the sexual revolution was being accomplished. There is no detailed description of the economic revolution in radical feminist writings; this was not the strong point of radical feminism. S. Firestone nevertheless gives some guidelines of the postrevolutionary society imagined by radical militants; a society in which the independence of children and women and the satisfaction of the needs of all people would achieve the first egalitarian distribution of wealth in the history of the mankind. G. Castro evaluates the utopian economic model proposed by radical feminists:

By the inclusion of children, the scheme belongs to the great tradition of utopian socialism. Although the concept of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ does appear in Firestone’s revolutionary scheme during the transition period, it must be noted that for her, just as in classical Marxism, this period is supposed to lead ultimately to a planned anarchy in which the state would wither away. In the absence of clearly defined programs for economic revolution, the main idea on this subject that emerges from the writings of radical feminists is this: they consider that socialism not only has never been achieved historically, but also, and especially, that it cannot be achieved without the prerequisite of the sexual revolution. Therefore, in their view, today’s existing socialist people’s republics cannot be taken as authentic examples of socialism. (Castro, 1990: 95)

Like the economic revolution, the cultural revolution depended on the prior elimination of the sexual dialectic. In the radical feminist view, it was not only a question of quantity, a search for more knowledge, but mainly a question of quality, aiming at the “achievement of cosmic consciousness.” The aesthetic mode, that is, our way of perceiving, interpreting and creating images of the world, would be more resolutely defined by reality; the technological mode; that is, our way of controlling the material aspects of the world would be less dominated by an obsession with objectivity. In the

cultural revolution, these two modes of perception would be integrated to form an androgynous culture: the lines between the two cultural categories would be blurred. Furthermore, an underground culture or alternative “counterculture” would no longer be necessary, because its aims would have become reality.

It was not enough to have a revolutionary vision of culture, it was necessary to have a power base, in this case, a massive support of feminist movements that would ensure the accomplishment of the cultural revolution. In the view of radical feminism, it was up to women to propose a redefinition of the culture and the world to come; or even to propose an absence of preconceived definitions, according to S. Firestone’s theory. Ti-Grace Atkinson proposes a theory of identity, as follows:

And elaborate and intact theory restructuring life as self-justifying in and of itself. [...] What if identity were built from the inside? What if one’s life were like a work of art, created by a dialogue with one’s surroundings, whether animate or inanimate? (Atkinson, 1974: 80)

The cosmic consciousness would be based on three elements that would put an end to the sexual, economic and cultural issue: total sexual freedom, individual self-determination and the transformation of the imaginable into the real. Castro analyzes the difficulties of the theory:

The honest question mark that follows the phrase cosmic consciousness is a confession of Firestone’s difficulty in pinning down this concept. It seems that the presiding spirit in radical feminist metaphysics and epistemology tends toward a synthesis between two hypotheses: one, total mastery of reality achieved through acting out the dream, the ultimate achievement of integrated culture; the other, a state of nature synonymous with equality and the absence of predefined roles, with any system of codification being suspect. The paradox is a challenge in itself. (Castro, 1990: 98)

To prepare the way for its revolution, the feminist movement, in the radical view, needed to base its strategy on a transitional program of democratic demands based on women’s requirements. This program could be carried out by coalitions of various feminist groups, in spite of their ideological differences; the main issue was women and not their theoretical divergences. Among the essential issues, featured each woman’s

right to control her own body, the evolution of the institution of the family, and economic liberation by ending all discrimination in employment and education.

The feminist radical revolution was structured into two phases: first, in industrialized countries, a sufficient degree of development has been achieved and would allow for women's full integration in industry; secondly, the industrialization of domestic labor should resolve the economic function of the family, thus, destroying the psychic structure of oppression. But what would society be like after the revolution, according to radical feminists? Even if there is no detailed, full-length portrait of this utopia, some rough sketches are known. Two main ideas are repeatedly mentioned: the end of all maternal responsibility for child rearing, thanks to the establishment of free nurseries and child care centers; and the industrialization of housework, including a communal system of housecleaning, laundry and meal services. Inspired by socialism, the only political party that had developed a program in favor of women's liberation, the feminist radicals honestly admitted their intention to undertake active socialist proselytizing within the new feminist movement.

## **2.6. Radicalism: The Instruments and Ideologies of Action**

The issue of action has often been a problem for American feminists. Because of the extremely rapid development of the feminist movement in the 1960's and 1970's, the organization of a coherent body of ideological thought was ignored. In 1970, when consciousness-raising appeared to have been achieved, new feminism, paradoxically, had an instrument for action but no unified program. Pluralist expression was an example of what the American feminist movement had always been, that is, a decentralized movement with a large variation of organized structures. Chronologically, the first of the structures was the broad national association working toward general political goals. Here we find the oldest organizations, vestiges of the first wave of feminism, including the League of Women Voters and the National Women's Party (NWP). Among the organizations born out of the new feminism, the two most important were unquestionably the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the highly active National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), which was created in 1971 for the purpose of promoting women in politics. From 1968, the Women's Equity Action

League (WEAL) concentrated on the struggle against sexual discrimination, while the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), founded in 1973, was the first large autonomous feminist organization that defended the cause of ethnic minority women.

These groups were generally organized on a national scale, with a hierarchical structure. Their local committees were also based on a very strict distribution of responsibilities. Some organizations received government funding and had their head offices in the national capital; others were much more modest and depended of members' contributions. Another category of organizations defended the interests of more specialized groups, usually in various professional sectors; other organizations existed only on a municipal scale. Nevertheless, the basic cell of the Women's movement has always been the particular local group which has been the essential site of radical feminism. Moreover, not all groups were based on radical feminism; many others were formed independently of any ideological current, to stress particular problems; their duration though, depended on their intended purpose. This often happened in the early days of new feminism, when shock actions were organized to arouse awareness. Ginette Castro analyses:

These diverse examples reveal the changeable character of the American feminist apparatus. The dramatic schism of the New York Radical Women in 1969 was an early foretaste of the breakup and disappearance of many groups. It is understandable that some militant feminists wound up concentrating on the problems posed by this fragmentation. In 1975, Jo Freeman deplored the fact that the movement had spread without first building a base, and criticized the radical feminist faction for their inertia and for allowing themselves to get bogged down in discussion over the same old issues. It is certain that this tendency to mutability, although is favored experimentation, compromised long-term actions. Nevertheless, fragmentation had its advantages, not least, the one mentioned by Jo Freeman, that of propagating the movement. The first stage could not be otherwise; in ten years- and this is a remarkable achievement- the new feminist movement not only drew in and radicalized millions of American women, but it also succeeded in producing ramifications in sectors that had been the most obstinate longtime opponents of feminism. [...] The presence at the women's conference of an antifeminist minority- estimated at 15 to 20 percent reveals, of course, that opposition existed. But the development of a backlash, not necessarily composed of women is a measure of the success of the Women's movement, whose impact can be evaluated in proportion to the combativeness of its adversaries. The Women's movement by this point was perceived as a political entity, from

which a majority of man and women expected a certain measure of activism. According to a Harris pool taken in 1979, 65 percent of Americans approved 'most of the efforts to strengthen and change women's status in our society' as against only 41 percent in 1970. (Castro, 1990: 175)

Although ideology was a cause of dissension, action was a factor toward unity; action highlighted a new aspect of feminine union, "militant sisterhood", that is, the dynamic of sisters acting together. In being collective, action was perceived as an effective way to make "sisterhood" concrete. The Houston conference was considered by many militants to be one of the summits of new feminism, from which women presented their new and energetic premise of "sisterhood" by the symbols of unity that marked the three days in Houston: the chain of women's hands and the immense choir of women's voices singing the liberation hymn "We Shall Overcome"; or the release of balloons upon the adoption of the amendment for sexual preference, which sealed the agreement for new cooperation between heterosexuals and lesbians within the Women's movement; and finally, when antifeminist militants joined hands in the chain of feminine solidarity.

Ginette Castro corroborates Jo Freeman's acknowledgement of the movement's essential weakness, the lack of a theoretical foundation. That was the main reason why some feminist militants had expressed the desire to make "sisterhood" a populist idea by integrating the greatest number of women into the movement and by gaining the confidence and the representation of the humblest social classes. In addition to unity, another concept that was central to the feminist philosophy of action was survival. Action was survival in the sense that it permitted women to outlive sexism and to begin their quest for identity and self-realization, which emphasized the entire consciousness-raising process, so important within feminist literary works. According to G. Castro:

In this context, each woman who achieves self-realization is contributing her bit to building feminism, since each newcomer who discovers that she can act on her own is a fledgling militant. The very essence of the movement is to work for each woman so that each woman can work for the movement. (Castro, 1990: 183)

In 1966, NOW created a special committee to deal with the issue of women's image and representation in the media. The media soon became the prime sphere of action for feminists of all tendencies. This development was a logical outgrowth of the feminist protestations and was an essential instrument for spreading the struggle against the false and degrading image of women showed by this same media. Women were constantly represented by only one side of their activities; domestic labor, as a housewife and consumer of household appliances and products, or as a sexual object. These connotations inspired NOW's first two initiatives in this domain: the creation of a Barefoot and Pregnant in the Kitchen award for guilty advertising agencies, and the development of a graffiti campaign which proposed to add the caption "This ad exploits women" across sexist billboards.

More ambitious and radical measures were taken against the press. These included, at two months' interval, the takeover of the editorial offices of the radical underground newspaper *Rat* on January 26 1970, and the detention for eleven hours of the editor-in-chief of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, John Mack Carter on March 18 1970. Both publications, according to the feminist militants, were sexist, ignored women's issues and represented women as passive, limited and stereotyped creatures. However, it is important not to paint too somber a picture of the journalistic profession; consciousness-raising had begun within women in the media. The evolution was further supported by the transformations of their goals: from action aimed at shocking people into awareness, it became an undertaking to inform and educate the public.

Another subject that dominated feminist actions was the voluntary interruption of pregnancy. Abortion was the issue that unleashed the most violent passions and radicalized a great number of women. This was easily explained by the hesitation in defending women's rights and freedom together with fighting against the social duty of motherhood, or respecting ethical and moral values that had dominated American traditionalism so far. The second reason that explained why feminist actions crystallized around this issue was the existence of specific, particularly oppressive laws against the voluntary interruption of pregnancy; the feminist position was clearly defined in 1967 by Article VII of the NOW Bill of Rights: existing abortion laws should not be

reformed, they should be repealed. Following the states of New York, Hawaii and Alaska, in May 1971 the United States Supreme Court agreed to review some cases and on January 22 1973 declared the abortion laws of Texas and Georgia unconstitutional, specifying that during the first trimester of pregnancy women were free to decide if they wanted to keep or not their babies.

Even more than abortion, rape was the issue that transformed feminist actions from shock tactics to a more patient process of public awareness. On January 24 1971, the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF) organized a day of rape testimony, which brought together rape victims who described their experiences and debated society's prejudices against raped women. Other groups organized similar actions, aiming to discuss the political, sociological and psychological aspects of the issue. Refusing to see frightened women obliged to stay home behind triple-locked doors every night, activists initiated a rape education activities program that included lessons of self-defense and policelike methods of investigation and exposure. August 1973 was declared Rape Prevention Month and various New York feminist groups announced that they were participating in separate and joint informational actions, aimed at the general public, and therefore, at men. The feminist battle against rape was one of the most important issues of new feminism. Ginette Castro concludes by analyzing the impact of the Women's Movement on the perception of our society and on what it should be:

If, thanks to the vigilant presence of radical feminists, America women do no fall into the earlier error made by some suffragists of compromising feminist principles to get their amendment at any price, the eventual passage of the ERA (needles to say, without crippling amendments to it) should not be the end of the line. It should be only a rite of passage, a means and not an end, enabling the new second wave American Feminist movement, on the strength of the law and the experience it has acquired in collective legal action, to deliver a new battle to inscribe sexual equality in the socioeconomic facts and end the "feminization of poverty". In so doing, it will have become a truly credible representative movement of American women organized for action, and having armed itself effectively, can and should pursue the battle for cultural androgyny, which is both a reinforcement and an extension of the battle for economic and political equality, and which, by dealing with the fundamental questions touching all human beings, liberates everyone universally. (Castro, 1990: 261)

**Conclusion: how the experience of American women in the 1950's and 1960's contributed to modern women's emancipation.**

As mentioned in the Introduction, the path followed by American women to outlive the idealistic view of their roles imposed by 1950's society, the increasing questioning of their condition and the development of the Women's Movements in the sixties were the essential issues of this study. The understanding of the newly born "American Way of Life" and its influence on women, the construction of the ideology of the "perfect housewife" and the crises of this ideology were the first elements examined; followed by the analysis of the process lived by these "perfect housewives" to break the chains of their idealized lives and to develop a collective awareness of the need to struggle for the advent of another "woman".

The research was based on the analyses of literary works that intent to break the vision of the fifties as the "golden days" of American society and to stress the true reality of American women during this period. The image of the happy housewife spoiling her perfect family in a flawless and modern house was the perfect representation of the changing culture of the postwar era; however, the real life conditions were totally different from this idealistic icon. The authors that aimed to demonstrate the real condition of women and their limitation to their "housewife" and "mother" roles were the major reference to understand the causes of the Feminist movement of the sixties. The Women's Movements were the obvious extension of this process; the enlightenment of their development and its consequences were a vital part of this research, establishing, thus, the connection between the early feminist movement of the sixties and seventies, and the new feminist struggle.

After investigating the means used by the American society of the fifties to construct the ideology of the idealized women, the meaning which magazines and other media targeted to women, it was possible to understand the sense and the reasons of this idealization process. Women were surrounded by this image of the "perfect housewife": magazines, TV series, radio programs and traditional standards were used as ways to convince them to adapt and to become this perfect woman. The ideology of the housewife was the main characteristic of the American society of the fifties.

Nevertheless, family life and the role of perfect wife and dedicated mother had turned women into lifeless, empty and unhappy beings that started to find this “American Way of Life” unsatisfying and disappointing. With the growth of the feeling “Is that all there is to life?” within women, the dissatisfaction and the will to change became a national issue and the “housewife’s problem” was increasingly widespread in all discussions and debates in all the areas of the supposedly perfect, 1950’s society.

As seen, with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963, a call was diffused to women, a call for change, for hope and, above all, a call for contestation. That is how the Women’s Movement of the Second Wave Feminism was born, out of a desperate need to change paradigms and values: a new feminine ideal was required. Both Egalitarian Feminists, led by Friedan and the NOW movement, and Radical Feminists of the 1970’s, even considering all the differences that opposed the two models, were instruments to the same goal: an emancipated and free modern woman that would have the right to run her life following her own will. This study’s main contribution and interest is the definition of a clear evolution from the housewife of the 1950’s, who was dominated and limited by the American culture of the time, to a conscious, activist and feminist woman, that not only changed social and cultural patterns in the United States, but also contributed to change women’s condition in the world. The American Women’s Movement was an essential and unique model to feminists in many countries, and, thus, the fifties were the turning point between an era that treated women as inferior human beings and a period that allowed the development and the solidification of women’s contestations:

Pop-culture television shows such as *Leave it to Beaver*, advocated a stay at home mom, working father and 2.5 children living happily in an upper middle class home in Familytown, U.S.A. The 1950s also saw a large conservative backlash against Elvis Presley, his gyrating hips, and so-called “Black music.” The clean-cut, All-American, image of musical acts such as Pat Boone was threatened by the “sexually explicit” and “inappropriate” nature of “Black music” and its increasing influence and integration into “White culture.” However, much as the youth’s desire for “cool” new music would not be silenced, women would not obey passively society’s calls for their return to the kitchen. As women acquired the taste for work, it sparked the same

revolutionary feminist ideals that subsided under conservatism in the 1920s. Herein, the Second Wave of feminism grew.<sup>13</sup>

The struggle experienced by 1950's and 1960's women and their evolution from housewives to committed feminist militants are an example and an inspiration for us, modern women, who have the feeling that all has already been acquired. The development of Third Wave feminism in the late eighties was a response to those who said that a new generation of feminists would not appear. The need to establish at least a provisional definition of the parameters of the Third Wave has been a fundamental concern for many of those who defend its existence. For Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, for instance, third wave is "women who were reared in the wake of the women's liberation movement of the seventies" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000: 15). One of the most recent contributions to the field of third wave feminism, Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier's *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, declare: "though we often refer to our feminism as the third wave, we want to render problematic an easy understanding of what the third wave is" (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003: 5). They assume, however, not only that there is such a phenomenon but also that it should be endorsed.

Not surprisingly, it is the conservative feminists who are constantly called upon as spokespersons for this new generation of feminist militants. Writers such as Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfield and Naomi Wolf argue against feminist critiques of rape, sexual harassment and abortion; they publish books and appear on the pages of popular young women's magazines, like *Glamour* and *YM*. Conservative postfeminism is in every way much more visible than the activist work that defines "third wave feminism".

Recently much media attention had been given to writings about third wave feminism, often labeled "postfeminism". In the perpetual battle of representation and definitional clout, the slippage from "third wave feminism" to "postfeminist" is important, because many of us working in the "third wave" by no means define our feminism as a groovier alternative to an over-and-done feminist movement. Let us be clear: "postfeminist" characterizes a group of

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<sup>13</sup> From the e-journal *Transcending Silence*, a site dedicated to "Electronic Publishing in Women's Studies". Kryger, Stacie; Spring 2004 issue. <[http://www.albany.edu/ws/journal/2004/kryger\\_3.html](http://www.albany.edu/ws/journal/2004/kryger_3.html)>

young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave. (Heywood; Drake, 2003: 1)

In *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, Doing Feminism*, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake suggest that a contradiction marks the requests and strategies of third wave feminists. Whereas conservative postfeminism relies on an opposition between “victim feminism” (second wave) and “power feminism” (third wave) and declare that power feminists aim to improve the victim feminists, both authors believe that the second and the third wave of feminists are neither incompatible nor opposed. Rather, they believe that third wave feminism is a movement that contains elements of the second wave feminism (critiques against stereotyped beauty, sexism and power structures), while it makes use of and defies the power of those structures. Some conservative postfeminist writers, such as Christina Hoff Sommers<sup>14</sup>, split feminism into two camps only: equity feminists (power feminists), those who fight within the traditional scholarship; and gender feminists (victim feminists), who seek to transform scholarship into a women-centered structure.

In the latest years, then, third wave feminists have often taken cultural production and sexual politics as essential sites of struggle; however, for second wave feminists, these actions do not seem “activist” enough. Within the new generation of feminists, whose birth dates fall between 1963 and 1974<sup>15</sup>, we can see this historical dialectic in operation but they struggle to bring the specificity of the time’s historical situation to the traditional definition of “feminism”. Third Wave is a feminist movement that includes persons of various genders, ages, nationalities, sexualities and classes to combine elements of equity feminism and gender feminism in a large group that still fights for equal opportunities, equal pay and equal work, but also seeks to transform the structures within each young people work. The characteristic freedom of the Third Wave is what

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<sup>14</sup> Christina Hoff Sommers is a former philosophy professor and American author known for her critique of late 20th-century feminism, and her writings about feminism in contemporary American culture. Her most widely discussed books are *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women* and *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*.

<sup>15</sup> A definition used by Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake in *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, Doing Feminism*, p. 4

defines it: girls who want to be boys, boys who want to be girls, boys and girls who insist they are both, whites who want to be black, blacks who want to or refuse to be white, successful individuals who look for community and coalition, identities formed by a persistently consumer-oriented culture. The Third Wave's mission statement is described as follows:

Third Wave is a member-driven multiracial, multicultural, multi-sexuality national non-profit organization devoted to feminist and youth activism for change. Our goal is to harness the energy of young women and men by creating a community in which members can network, strategize, and ultimately, take action. By using our experiences as a starting point, we can create a diverse community and cultivate a meaningful response. (Heywood & Drake, 2003: 7)

Contradiction is one of the bases of Third Wave feminism, and its important place within the movement has been theorized by critiques of the white women's movement that were initiated by women of color. According to them, this new generation of militants is concerned by black women's issues as well, whereas the feminists of the Second Wave were focused on the changing middle-class, white women's reality. By 1990 the contributions of working-class women, lesbians, women of color and activists from developing countries had transformed an initially white, middle-class movement into a more diverse, mature and global tendency. The feminist movement has never been as widespread as in the twenty-first century; organizations for women's rights are present in different countries: Women in Law and Development in Africa, National Black Women Health Project in the United States, Self-Employed Women Association in India, Working Group toward a Feminist Europe and many more. Feminist struggle and demands were strong enough to change divorce laws in Egypt, to legalize measures against sexual harassment in Japan and to equalize the number of female and male candidates within French political parties.

Even if Third Wave feminism celebrates women's multiple identities in today's world, encourage personal empowerment, sexual diversity and social changes, the critiques toward the movement are intense. The most common criticism of Third Wave may be that it is not political enough, it has a highly individualistic philosophy that generally values personal empowerment over activism and which may in fact discourage women

from becoming feminist activists. Other critiques are based on its focus on identity issues and not in universal concerns, and on equating women's sexuality with power, which increases the sexualisation of women. Even if the new generation of feminists is not as active and political as the Second Wave feminism, their mission is to keep fighting for women's rights; they remind us, modern women, that early generations were already struggling for freedom and equality. Third Wave Feminism is not a break or a disconnection from history, it is just an evolution from a world in which woman was limited into a "housewife", "mother" and "sexual object" role, to a free, modern and conscious woman that cannot forget the combat from early feminist generations.

Following this study and responding to an increasing fascination with the fifties, its social changes and unique aesthetics, further research will be developed aiming the analysis of women's evolution in American and British society. A meticulous study which will investigate and compare feminist movements in the United States and in Britain will establish a detailed sketch of both societies during the 1950's and 1960's. Similarities, differences and influences between these cultures and the social movements led by women in both countries will form the basis of the research.

Even if the fifties are a captivating period that still instigates curiosity, passion and dedication, we cannot let us be "hypnotized" by its magical and romantic aesthetics and images. We should not forget that diapers, dishes, vacuum-cleaners and canned food did not and will never give a woman the same happiness and fulfilment as freedom, equality and respect can give.

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# **Appendices**

## **1. Chronology of the Women's Movement (1945-1990)**

### **1946**

Congress votes for the first time on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Refused.

### **1950-1953**

ERA suffers another two defeats in Congress.

### **1961**

President John F. Kennedy established the first Presidential Commission on the Status of Women.

### **1963**

Publication of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. Congress passes the Equal Pay Act, which establishes the benefits of the minimum wage and prohibits employers from discrimination on the basis of sex in the payment for equal work.

### **1964**

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act forbids sexual discrimination in the private sector.

### **1965**

A group of women raises the question of women's rights at the conference of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

### **1966**

Foundation of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

### **1967**

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs Executive Order 11375, which forbids sexual discrimination in the public sector.

Birth of the first radical feminist group, the New York Radical Women (NYRW).

Publication of the *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas.

### **1968**

Sabotage of the Miss America pageant at Atlantic City, N.J. by a group of radical feminists.

Birth of the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH).

First national conference of the Women's Liberation Movement.

## **1969**

Formation of the three New York radical feminist groups: the Redstockings, the Feminists, and the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF).

## **1970**

Takeover by women of the radical underground newspaper *Rat*; a hundred feminists hold a sit-in at the *Ladies' Home Journal* to protest against the image of women presented by women's magazines.

The United Auto Workers become the first major labor union to declare its support to the ERA.

Hawaii, Alaska and New York become the first states to liberalize their abortions laws.

The Women's Bureau declares its support for the ERA.

National strike by women held on August 26.

Publication of *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett.

## **1971**

Rape speakout day organized by NYRF.

The University of Michigan becomes the first university to launch an affirmative action program for the hiring and promotion of women.

Founding by Gloria Steinem and Brenda Feigen Fasteau of the Women's Action Alliance, the first national coordinating center for the various programs of the Women's Movement.

## **1972**

The ERA passes the House of Representatives and the Senate, 49 years after its first introduction in Congress.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Act gives the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) the right to undertake legal proceedings against sexual discrimination offenders.

Founding of the *Ms.* magazine.

Shirley Chisholm runs as a candidate for the Democratic Party's nomination for the presidency of the United States.

## **1973**

The United States Supreme Court recognizes American women's constitutional right to abortion, in its decision in the case of *Roe v. Wade*.

Formation of the National Black Feminist Organization.

August 1973 declared Rape Prevention Month.

#### **1974**

Creation of the Association of Mexican-American Women.

Ella Grasso becomes the first woman to be elected as a state governor (Connecticut) in her own right (without depending on the name of a late husband...)

#### **1975**

First meeting of the American Indian Women's Leadership Conference in New York.

#### **1976**

Formation of the ERAmerica to work toward the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.

NASA accepts the principle of the training of women astronauts.

#### **1977**

The National Women's Conference held in Houston.

Creation of the National Women's Studies Association.

#### **1978**

NOW organizes a boycott of the states that have not ratified the ERA yet.

Congress extends the ERA ratification deadline to June 30 1982.

Creation of the National Lesbian Feminist Organization.

First national feminist conference on pornography.

#### **1979**

Participation of about 50 organizations in the National Abortion Rights Week.

March of 5,000 feminists against pornography in New York.

#### **1980**

March of 90,000 demonstrators organized by NOW in favor of the ratification of the ERA in Chicago.

Equal representation of both sexes at the Democratic party national convention.

#### **1981**

For the first time in the history of the United States, a woman (Sandra Day O'Connor) is appointed to a seat on the Supreme Court.

## **1982**

ERA reintroduced into Congress, after expiration of the ratification deadline extension.

## **1983**

The Supreme Court reaffirms American women's constitutional right to abortion.

Sally Ride become the first American woman to participate in a space mission.

The National Council of Churches publishes a collection of biblical texts rewritten to eliminate sexism.

## **1984**

The ERA is again reintroduced into Congress.

## **1988**

President Ronald Reagan files a "friend of the court" brief urging the Supreme Court to review a Missouri case challenging *Roe v. Wade*, thus reexamining the abortion issue. The court, dominated by conservative judges appointed by President Reagan, agreed to do so.

## **1989**

When the Supreme Court begin hearings in the abortion challenge, more than 300,000 pro-choice advocates march in Washington in favor of keeping abortion legal.

NOW reacts to the Supreme Court decision by calling for starting a third political party to fight for abortion rights and other issues. The announcement provoked new controversy in the Women's movement, as some feminists disagree with this strategy.

In October, President George Bush bans the legislation that would have provided federal funding of abortions for victims of rape or incest. Congress fails to muster the required two-thirds majority to override the veto, but the vote of 231- 191 suggest that pro-choice support is growing.

## 2. 1950's Advertisements of Household Products



Magazine advertisement; Image courtesy of The Advertising Archives.

Source:

<<http://www.creativelydifferentblinds.com/CollectionsAdvertisingArchives/MagazineAdvertisement1950s2.aspx>>

Just open the door...all the foods you use most often  
are Right Out in Front...no fumbling, no groping, no reaching



## Hotpoint Big Bin

America's new refrigerator-freezer—its on rollers!

It's almost automatic! The giant new Big Bin door shelf puts at your fingertips all your fresh fruits and vegetables. Plus those hard-to-get-out big bottles (even half-gallons) that jam up top and bottom shelves in most other refrigerators. Then look in your portable "showcase" crispers. See how quickly, easily, you find what you need for your salads, your fruit dishes.

Still more news! Because of Big Bin's ideal humidity and moisture Circulaire Cooling, foods last and last and last—stay fresh and firm and fine.

Big Bin rolls out from the wall with just fingertip

pressure for easy cleaning behind and beneath. What's more, Big Bin's the world's easiest refrigerator to clean inside.

Fully automatic defrosting, of course. And the true food freezer, with 75-pound capacity, stays at a vapor-safe zero. And still more! Sliding, adjustable aluminum shelves. A complete Dairy-Door in the door, with 6-pound-capacity cheese keepers, spread-cream butter-bin, and egg rack. And your choice of five beautiful decorative colors, or classic white! See your Hotpoint Dealer soon.



Engage now! Two-Door also features the revolutionary "Big Bin." Plus, all essential, every-oddly-useful features. Features that women everywhere have wanted. The most beautiful and useful food keeper ever built. See it soon!

Every day's a holiday with

# Hotpoint

Hotpoint Co., U.S. Division of General Electric Company, Chicago 44

Ranges • Refrigerators • Automatic Washers  
Chest Freezers • Gas Ranges • Dishwashers • Freezers  
Water Heaters • Food Processors • Air Conditioners

1956 Hot Point Refrigerator original vintage advertisement. With the exclusive new Big Bin door shelf that puts all the foods you use most often right out in front.

Source: <<http://www.adclassix.com/a4/56hotpointrefrigerator.html>>



**MODERN HIDE-A-BED** sofa in black and white metallic wood. Also in turquoise, beige, pink, green. Full size shown, \$299.50. Apartment size, \$269.50.



**LAWSON HIDE-A-BED** sofa in turquoise installa. Also in dark green, persimmon, beige, sage green. Full size shown, \$219.50. Apartment size, \$209.50.

Manufactured by U. S. Home Appliances, Inc., 10000 Simmons Road, Detroit, Mich.  
**Prices for other Simmons convertibles begin as low as \$169.50. Convenient terms are usually available.**

You sit lower...  
 more comfortably...  
 on a **HIDE-A-BED®** sofa

Smartly styled Hide-A-Bed sofas are a pleasure to look at—and as comfortable to sit down on.



Real luxury thanks to lower seating height, a new pitch to the back and the exclusive "cushion support" that Simmons puts under its own famous Beautyrest seat cushions.

Style? More than 30! A variety

of sizes, and more than 200 decorative selected fabrics to choose from.

Beautyrest® mattress. The Hide-A-Bed sofa opens in seconds, with Beautyrest, to a full length, full-width Simmons innerspring mattress. Even a famous Beautyrest, if you choose, for only \$89 more.

Hide-A-Bed offers Simmons value in every stitch and every coil and every inch of the all-steel frame.

**Remember,** no other sofa bed can be called a Hide-A-Bed sofa. A Hide-A-Bed sofa is made only by Simmons.



**HIDE-A-BED SOFA** in gay Provincial print. Quilted effect in cream brown. Also in forest green, gray, gold. Full size shown, \$299.50. Apartment size, \$269.50.



1956 Simmons Hide a Sofa- Bed original vintage advertisement. Simmons convertible sofa beds begin as low as \$169.50.

Source: <<http://www.adclassix.com/a4/56simmonssofabed.html>>

### 3. Women's Movements



Feminist March for Women's Right, 1966.

Source: <<http://people.howstuffworks.com/feminism4.htm>>



Lesbian march in the 1970's.

Source: [http://sitemaker.umich.edu/lesbian.history/lesbian\\_feminism](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/lesbian.history/lesbian_feminism)



Second-wave feminists march during the Women's Liberation parade in 1970.

Source: <<http://people.howstuffworks.com/feminism2.htm>>

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