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[943-945]

Back to the Kitchen

World War II had interrupted traditional patterns of behavior for both men and women. As servicemen went overseas, women left their homes to work. After 1945, there was a period of adjustment as the men returned. In the 1950s, traditional gender roles were reaffirmed, even though, paradoxically, more women entered the work force than ever before.

Men, of course, expected to go to school and then find jobs to support their families. Viewing themselves as the primary breadwinners, they wanted their jobs waiting for them after the war. For women, the situation was more difficult. Many had enjoyed working during the war and were reluctant to retreat to the home, although the government and employers persistently encouraged them to do so. In 1947, Life magazine ran a long photo essay called "The American Woman's Dilemma." It argued that women were caught in a conflict between the traditional expectation to stay home and the desire to have a paid job. A 1946 Fortune poll also captured the discontent of some women. Asked whether they would prefer to be born again as men or women, 25 percent of the women asked said they would prefer to be men. That dissatisfaction was strongest among white, well-educated, middle-class women, which was understandable, since family economic circumstances usually required black and lower-class white women to continue working outside the home.

By the 1950s, doubts and questions had been mostly suppressed. The baby boom increased average family size and made the decision to remain home easier. The flight to the suburbs gave women more to do, and they settled into the routines of redecorating their homes and gardens and transporting children to and from activities and schools.

In 1956, when Life produced a special issue on women, the message differed strikingly from that of nine years earlier. Profiling Marjorie Sutton, the magazine spoke of the "Busy Wife's Achievements" as "Home Manager, Mother, Hostess, and Useful Civic Worker." Married at 16, Marjorie was now busy with the PTA, Campfire Girls, and charity causes. She cooked and sewed for her family, which included four children, supported her husband by entertaining 1,500 guests a year, and worked out on the trampoline "to keep her size 12 figure." Marjorie Sutton reflected the widespread social emphasis on marriage and home. Many women went to college to find husbands; if they succeeded, they dropped out. Almost two-thirds of the women in college stopped before completing a degree, compared with less than half the men. Women were expected to marry young, have children early, and support their husbands' careers.

Despite the reaffirmation of the old ideology that a woman's place was in the home, the 1950s were years of unnoticed but important change. Because the supply of single women workers was diminished by the low birthrate of the Depression years and by increased schooling and early marriage, older married women began entering the labor force in large numbers for the first time. In 1940, only 15 percent of American wives had jobs. By 1950, 21 percent were employed, and ten years later, the figure had risen to 30 percent. Moreover, married women now accounted for more than half of all working women, a dramatic reversal of earlier patterns.

Although many working women were poor, divorced, or widowed, many others worked to acquire the desirable new products that were badges of middle-class status. They stepped into the new jobs created by economic expansion, clustering in office, sales, and service positions, occupations already defined as female. They and their employers considered their work subordinate to their primary role as wives and mothers.

Comparatively few entered professions where they would have challenged traditional notions of woman's place. As Life magazine pointed out in 1956, "Household skills take her into the garment trades; neat and personable, she becomes office worker and sales lady; patient and dexterous, she does well on competitive, detailed factory work; compassionate, she becomes teacher and nurse."

Black women worked as always but often lost the jobs they had won during the war. As the total percentage of women in the Detroit automobile industry dropped from 25 to 7.5, for example, jobs for black women nearly disappeared. Their median income at the end of the 1940s was less than half that of white women. Nor did they obtain white-collar work as easily as white women. But during the 1950s, they succeeded both in moving into white-collar positions and in improving their income. By 1960, more than a third of all black women had clerical, sales, service, or professional jobs, and their paychecks were 70 percent of those of white women.

Despite women's mixed experiences, society continued to view women in traditional ways. The conviction that women's main role was homemaking justified low wages and the denial of promotions. Adlai Stevenson, Democratic presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956, defined the female role in politics, telling a group of women that "the assignment for you, as wives and mothers, you can do in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand." As in much of the nineteenth century, a woman was "to influence man and boy" in her "humble role of housewife" and mother.

Pediatrician Benjamin Spock agreed. In *Baby and Child Care* (1946), the book most responsible for the child-rearing patterns of the postwar generation, he advised mothers to stay at home if they wanted to raise stable and secure youngsters.

Movies seized on popular stereotypes and dramatized them. Doris Day, charming and wholesome, was a favorite heroine. In movie after movie, she showed how an attractive woman who played her cards right could land her man -- the assumed goal of every woman.

Sexuality was a troublesome if compelling topic in the postwar years. In 1948, Alfred C. Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey was an Indiana University zoologist who had previously studied the gall wasp. When asked to teach a course on marriage problems, he found little published material about human sexual activity and decided to collect his own. He compiled case histories of 5,300 white males, analyzed their personal backgrounds, and recorded patterns of sexual behavior.

Kinsey shocked the country with his statistics on premarital, extramarital, and otherwise illicit sexual activity. Among males who went to college, he concluded, 67 percent had engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage; 84 percent of those who went to high school but not beyond had done the same. Thirty-seven percent of the total male population had experienced some kind of overt homosexual activity. One out of every six farm boys in America had copulated with animals. Kinsey published a companion volume, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), that detailed many of the same sexual patterns. Although critics denounced the books, both sold widely, for they opened the door to a subject that had previously been considered taboo.

Interest in sexuality was reflected in the fascination with sex goddesses like Marilyn Monroe. With her blonde hair, breathy voice, and raw sexuality, she personified the forbidden side of the good life and became one of Hollywood's most popular stars. The images of such film goddesses corresponded to male fantasies of women, visible in *Playboy*, which first appeared in 1953. As for these men's wives, they were expected to man age their suburban homes and to be cheerful and willing objects of their husbands' desire.

(photo) Sex goddess Marilyn Monroe -- shown here in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* -- stirred the fantasies of American males in the 1950s. Despite the family orientation of suburban America, millions were captivated by her seductive appeal.

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The Women's Movement

The black struggle for equality in the 1960s and 1970s was accompanied by a women's movement that grew out of the agitation for civil rights but soon developed a life of its own. That struggle, like the struggles by Hispanics and Native Americans, employed the confrontational approach and the vocabulary of the civil rights movement to create sufficient pressure for change. Using proven strategies, it sometimes proceeded even faster than the black effort.

Attacking the Feminine Mystique

Many white women joined the civil rights movement only to find that they were second-class citizens. Men, black and white, held the policy positions and relegated women to menial chores when not actually involved in demonstrations or voter drives. Many women also felt sexually exploited by male leaders. Stokely Carmichael's comment only underscored their point. "The only position for women in SNCC," he said, "is prone." In response, women learned the importance of militant, well-publicized pressure tactics in changing their own situation.

though the civil rights movement helped spark the women's movement, broad social changes provided the preconditions. During the 1950s and 1960s, increasing numbers of married women entered the labor force, and half of all women worked. Yet, in 1963, the average working woman earned only 63 percent of what a man could expect; in 1973, only 57 percent. Just as important, many more young women were attending college. By 1970, women earned 41 percent of all B.A.'s awarded, in comparison with only 25 percent in 1950. These educated young women held high hopes for themselves. Many found that sexual liberation failed to bring equality. Feminism was compelling both in its analysis of women's problems and in the solutions it offered.

Just as in the civil rights movement, reform legislation played a part in ending sexual discrimination. Title 7 of the 1964 Civil Rights bill, as originally drafted, prohibited discrimination on the grounds of race. During legislative debate, conservatives opposed to black civil rights seized on an amendment to include discrimination on the basis of gender, in the hope of defeating the entire bill. But the amendment passed, giving women a legal tool for attacking discrimination. They discovered, however, that the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission regarded women's complaints of discrimination as far less important than those of blacks.

When a small group of women failed to win support from existing women's groups to pressure the commission to change its policies, they decided to form their own civil rights organization. In 1966, a group of 28 professional women, including Betty Friedan, established the National Organization for Women (NOW) "to take action to bring American women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now." By full participation the founders not only meant fair pay and equal opportunity but a new, more egalitarian form of marriage. NOW also attacked the "false image of women... in the media." By 1967, some 1,000 women had joined the organization, and four years later, its membership reached 15,000.

NOW was a political pressure group. To radical feminists, who had come up through the civil rights movement, NOW's agenda failed to confront adequately the problem of gender discrimination. They tried, through the technique of consciousness raising, to help women understand the extent of their oppression and to analyze their experience as a political phenomenon.

Feminism at High Tide

In 1971, Helen Reddy expressed the energy of the women's movement in a song called "I Am Woman":

I am woman, hear me roar
In numbers too big to ignore
And I know too much to go back and pretend

'Cause I've heard it all before
And I've been down there on the floor,
No one 's ever gonna keep me down again.
Oh, yes, I am wise
But it's wisdom born of pain.
Yes, I've paid the price
But look how much I gained
If I have to
I can do anything.
I am strong,
I am invincible,
I am woman.

Reddy's song reflected a new militancy and sense of self-confidence among women. In the early 1970s, a survey noted that in a two-year period, the number of college students who believed women were oppressed had doubled, and the number continued to rise.

Real changes were under way in the effort to end that discrimination. A 1970 survey of first-year college students showed that men interested in such fields as business, medicine, engineering, and law outnumbered women eight to one; by 1975, the ratio had dropped to three to one. The proportion of women beginning law school quadrupled between 1969 and 1973. Women gained access to the military academies and entered senior officer ranks. In the banking industry, women's share of jobs increased from 18 to 34 percent between 1970 and 1980. According to the Census Bureau, 45 percent of mothers with preschool children held jobs away from home in 1980. That figure was four times greater than it had been 30 years before. To be sure, many employers systematically excluded women from certain positions, and women usually held "female" jobs in the clerical, sales, and service sectors, but the progress was still unmistakable.

Legal changes brought women more benefits and opportunities. Title 9 of the Education Amendments of 1972 broadened the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The new legislation, which barred gender bias in federally assisted education activities and programs, made the admission of women easier and changed the nature of intercollegiate athletics. By 1980, fully 30 percent of the participants in intercollegiate athletics were women, compared with 15 percent before Title 9 had become law.

A flurry of publications spread the principles of the women's movement. Gloria Steinem, author of a regular political column in New York magazine, first thought of herself as a professional journalist with no particular interest in women's affairs. "I certainly didn't understand that women were an 'out' group," she noted, "and I would even insist that I wasn't discriminated against as a woman." While working on a story about abortion, however, she began to see that discrimination took many forms. She realized she "had been unable to get an apartment because, the reasoning was, a single woman wasn't financially responsible -- and if she was responsible, she was probably a prostitute." Steinem began writing more about women, and in 1972, she and several other women founded a new magazine. Ms. succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, reaching a wide audience of women who were not members of feminist organizations. In the first eight days, the 300,000 copies of the preview issue sold out. By 1973, there were almost 200,000 subscribers. Most of them were under 35, had graduated from college, and were working in professional, managerial, or technical jobs.

Among other publications that publicized the issues and concerns of the women's movement was The New Woman's Survival Catalogue, which provided useful advice to women readers. Our Bodies, Ourselves, a handbook published by a women's health collective, encouraged women to understand and control their bodies; it sold 850,000 copies between 1971 and 1976.

These new books and magazines differed radically from older women's magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. Those publications aimed at women at home and focused on their domestic interests, needs, and sometimes fantasies. Ms., in dramatic contrast, dealt with abortion, employment, and discrimination and provided a forum for the discussion of important feminist issues.

Despite certain shared interests, women's struggle for equality was decentralized, diffuse, and often internally divided. As *Time* magazine pointed out in 1972, "The aims of the movement range from the modest, sensible amelioration of the female condition to extreme and revolutionary visions."

Groups like NOW pressed for equal employment opportunities, child care centers, and abortion reform. Women both in and out of NOW who were concerned with legal reforms worked for congressional passage, then ratification, of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. Passed by Congress in 1972, and seemingly on the verge of ratification, it stated simply, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

Other feminist groups adopted more radical positions. Legal changes were not enough, they argued. Fundamental changes in sexual identity were needed to end male domination and social exploitation. Shulamith Firestone, a former member of the New Left, explained in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) the necessity of a new society in which women were freed "from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available." Moreover, traditional gender and family roles must be discarded and "the childbearing and childrearing role [diffused] to the society as a whole, men as well as women." Other socialist feminists claimed that it was not enough to strike out at male domination, for capitalist society itself was responsible for women's plight. Only through the process of revolution could women be free.

Not all women were feminists, to be sure. Many felt the women's movement was contemptuous of women who stayed at home to perform traditional tasks. Marabel Morgan was one who still insisted that the woman had a place at home by her husband's side. The wife of a Florida attorney, she argued that "it is only when a woman surrenders her life to her husband, reveres and worships him, and is willing to serve him, that she becomes really beautiful to him." In her book *The Total Woman* (1973), she counseled others to follow the 4A approach: accept, admire, adapt, appreciate. She suggested ways of meeting a husband at the door and cited approvingly the case of one woman who "welcomed her husband home in black mesh stockings, high heels, and an apron. That's all." As of 1975, some 500,000 copies of the hardcover volume had been sold.

In politics, Phyllis Schlafly headed a nationwide campaign to block ratification of the ERA. Author of several books, she was vigorous and articulate. On the ERA she was adamant: "It won't do anything to help women, and it will take away from women the rights they already have, such as the right of a wife to be supported by her husband, the right of a woman to be exempted from military combat, and the right, if you wanted it, to go to a single-sex college." The ERA, she predicted, would lead to the establishment of coed bathrooms, the elimination of alimony, and the legalization of homosexual marriage. Women, she argued, already had legal backing enough for their rights.

Schlafly and her allies had their way. Within a few years of passage of the ERA, 35 states had agreed to the measure, but then the momentum disappeared. Even with an extension in the deadline granted in 1979, the amendment could not win support of the necessary 38 states. The opposition campaign drew on the assistance of women who felt threatened by the changes occurring and men, particularly in state legislatures, who had long been uncomfortable with the women's movement. By mid-1982, the ERA was dead.

Even so, the 1980s brought significant gains. In politics, women won mayoral races in the nation's major cities. Far more women were elected to state legislatures and to

Congress. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor as the first woman Supreme Court justice, and in 1984, Geraldine Ferraro, a Democratic member of Congress, became the first woman vice-presidential candidate for a major party.

Despite substantial gains, women still faced serious problems. Access to new positions did not change their concentration in lower-paying jobs. In 1985, most women still served as secretaries, cashiers, bookkeepers, registered nurses, and waitresses -- the same jobs most frequently held ten years before. Even when women moved into positions traditionally held by men, their progress often stopped at the lower and middle levels. Interruptions of work -- to bear children or assume family responsibilities -- impeded advancement. Lack of experience served as another convenient excuse for failure to promote women.

Critics also became increasingly concerned about continuing wage differentials between women and men. In 1985, full-time working women still earned only 63.6 cents for every dollar earned by men. Their concentration in the so-called pink-collar positions -- traditional women's jobs -- made further improvement difficult. Arguments that women should receive equal pay for equal work now led to demands for equal pay for different jobs of similar value. Comparable-worth cases began to work their way through the courts.

Women were likewise worried about the erosion of their right to abortion. Despite the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, the issue remained very much alive. The number of abortions increased dramatically in the decade after the decision. By some estimates, 10 million lawful abortions were performed in that decade, or one for every three births. In response, "prolife" forces mobilized. Nellie Gray organized a march on Washington every January 22 to call attention to the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision. "It's murder, pure and simple," she said. "Abortion means killing babies." Opponents lobbied to cut off federal funds that allowed the poor to obtain the abortions the better-off could pay for themselves; they insisted that abortions should be performed in hospitals and not in less expensive clinics; and they worked to reverse the original decision itself.

Though the Supreme Court, which included the first woman in its history, reaffirmed its judgment in 1983, the pro-life movement was not deterred. In 1989, a solidifying conservative majority on the Court ruled in Webster v. Reproductive Health Services that while women's right to abortion remained intact, state legislatures could impose limitations if they chose. With that judgment, a major legislative debate over the issue began, and numerous states began to mandate restrictions. In response, the courts heard still further cases to determine what should remain legal.

In 1992, in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, the Supreme Court reaffirmed what it termed the "essence" of the right to abortion, while permitting further state restrictions. In a narrow 5-4 decision, it upheld most provisions of a Pennsylvania law that established a 24-hour waiting period for women seeking abortions and required teenage girls to secure the permission of a parent (or a judge) before ending a pregnancy. Although the Court struck down as an undue burden a provision requiring a woman to notify her husband of her plan to have an abortion, the ruling clearly gave states greater latitude in the overall restrictive effort. It also made an abortion harder to obtain, particularly for poor women and young women. With both proponents and opponents of abortion unhappy with the decision, the issue remained very much alive.

Despite the counterattacks, the women's movement flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. In the tenth anniversary issue of Ms. magazine, in 1982, founding editor Gloria Steinem noted the differences a decade had made. "Now, we have words like 'sexual harassment' and 'battered women,'" she wrote. "Ten years ago, it was just called 'life.'" She also observed that "now, we are becoming the men we wanted to marry. Ten years ago, we were trained to marry a doctor, not be one." Betty Friedan, whose book *The*

Feminine Mystique (1963) had helped mobilize a pervasive discontent two decades before, likewise admitted in 1983:

I am still awed by the revolution that book helped spark. I keep being surprised, as the changes the women's movement set in motion continue to play themselves out in our lives -- the enormous and mundane, subtle and not so subtle, delightful, painful, immediate, far-reaching, paradoxical, inexorable and probably irreversible changes in women's lives -- and in men's.

In 1991, even Blondie Bumstead, the cartoon figure who had amused readers for decades with her domestic antics, went to work. Still another mark of the success of the women's movement was the growth of a men's movement to explore questions of male identity. While women savored their gains, however, some worried that complacency was setting in. Many young women who enjoyed the fruits of the movement avoided the feminist label and shunned involvement in militant campaigns. Others remained active, convinced that only with continued pressure would women ever achieve full equality.

(graph) Women in the Work Force, 1920-1990. This graph shows the dramatic increase in the number of women in the work force in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Note particularly the rise in the number of working women 25-44 years old. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

(photo) "This healthy, normal baby has a handicap. She was born female." Awareness of racial discrimination led women to speak out against discrimination based on sex, as shown in this pointed advertisement sponsored by the National Organization for Women.

(graph) Changes in Female Employment, 1940-1989. Percent of all employed women. Sources: Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States* (1976) and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1991.

(photo) The women's movement spawned a number of publications that attempted to give women greater control over various aspects of their own lives. The book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and *Ms.* magazine were two important sources in that effort.

(photo) Women marched to mobilize support for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, but the campaign failed, as opponents aroused public fears and blocked support in a number of key states. A decade after passage, the ERA was dead.

(photo) Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman justice to sit on the United States Supreme Court. Her pre-Court career was similar to that of many other women, as she was denied numerous jobs when she emerged from law school.

[1067-1068]

Growing Up

In the mid-1970s, the birthrate began to rise slowly after a decade and a half of decline. The baby boom, which peaked in 1960 with a rate of 24 births per 1,000 people, had created a population explosion in the years after World War II before leveling off. In 1981, the rate stood at 16, then rose to nearly 17 in 1990, as demographers viewed the new increase in births as part of a long-term trend.

But children less frequently lived in traditional homes. Despite the stereotype of the breadwinner father, the homemaker mother, and two children, the Labor Department estimated that only 7 percent of the nation's families matched that pattern in the late 1970s. Divorce shattered the mold. By 1980, the rate reached a historic peak, as the courts granted nearly 1.2 million divorces, the highest total in the nation's history. In 1990, the figure of 1.175 million was almost as high. For each 1,000 marriages there were 480 divorces, down slightly from 490 in 1980, but significantly higher than 328 per 1,000 in 1970 and 258 per 1,000 in 1960. The social stigma once attached to divorce disappeared, and the nation elected its first divorced president. "Nonfamily households" became increasingly common. Between 1980 and 1990, such households, which might be led by either a man or a woman, increased from 26 to 29 percent of the total number, while the percentage of family households declined. Single-parent families,

particularly those" headed by women, were now common. In 1960, 11 percent of all children lived in such homes; by 1990, the figure had reached 25 percent. For blacks, the proportion of families headed by women was three times as great as for whites. A 1986 study observed that children in such families were more likely to leave school, have children out of wedlock, and end up on welfare.

During hard times, particularly for members of the working class, new children could pose problems. An extra mouth to feed could make a difference to a family on the fringe. New children also required women of all classes to consider the relationship between family and career. Women entering the work force with long-range employment commitments had to juggle work and home schedules and find adequate child care facilities.

The rising rate of runaway children became another product of changed family life. According to some estimates, more than a million children between the ages of 10 and 17 were on the run.

They left home for various reasons. Some were driven out. Others were victims of physical abuse. Still others fled violent arguments or other recession-induced strains in family life. Many returned home within a few days. Some, however, remained on city streets. In 1974, Congress passed the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which established telephone hot lines and temporary shelters. But the shelters served only 45,000 youths a year, leaving countless others without help.

Even more ominous was the rising death rate among the young. The Public Health Service reported in 1982 that the death rate for most Americans had dropped significantly over a 30-year period, and it continued to drop throughout the decade, but the rate for those between 15 and 24 rose steadily after 1976. Automobile accidents, murders, and suicides caused three out of four deaths for that group.

Growing Old

As concern with the problems of the young increased, awareness of the plight of the old also grew. Elderly people made up the fastest-growing age group in modern America. Between 1900 and 1980, when the population of the country tripled, the number of people over 65 rose eight fold and continued to rise in the next decade. In the 1980s, the number of Americans over 75 grew by more than 27 percent. Underlying the rapid increase was the steady advance in medical care, which in the twentieth century had increased life expectancy from 47 to 74 years. Americans watched Bob Hope celebrate his eightieth birthday, George Burns, over 90, continue to act, and Ronald Reagan, well into his 70s, govern the country. They became aware of the "aging revolution," which promised to become the most lasting of all twentieth-century social changes.

The elderly raised new issues in a nation suffering periodic recession. Many wanted to continue working and resented mandatory retirement rules that drove them from their jobs. Pleading their cause was Representative Claude Pepper of Florida, octogenarian head of the House Select Committee on Aging, who declared, "I am like an old hickory tree. The older I get, the tougher I get." Legislation in 1978 raised the mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70. That helped older workers but decreased employment opportunities for younger workers seeking jobs.

Generational resentment over jobs was compounded by the knotty problems faced by the social security system established a half century before. As more and more Americans retired, the system could not generate sufficient revenue to make the payments due without assistance from the general governmental fund. In the early 1980s, it appeared that the entire system might collapse.

A government solution involving higher taxes for those still employed and a later age for qualifying for benefits rescued the fund.

At an intensely personal level, American families faced difficult decisions about how to care for older parents who could no longer care for themselves. In the past, the elderly might naturally have come into their children's homes, but attitudes and family

patterns had changed. Children were fewer than in earlier generations, and as women gravitated to jobs outside, they were less able to assist in the home care of an elderly parent. Retirement villages and nursing homes provided two alternatives, but the decision to place a parent under institutional care was often excruciating.

Margaret Stump, an occupational therapist from Tenaflly, New Jersey, agonized over such a decision. For six years she flew to Lima, Ohio, every three months to see her mother, who was over 90 years old. Finally, she decided to bring her to a New Jersey nursing home. "I felt that she'd be better once she got to a home," Margaret recalled. "But I knew she wanted to be in her own house. It was a very difficult decision. I had to wait until I thought she wouldn't know where she was."