A Strange Stirring

The Feminine Mystique and AMERICAN WOMEN at the DAWN of the 1960s

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BASIC BOOKS
A Member of the Perseus Books Group
New York
The Unliberated 1960s

On December 22, 1962, one month before The Feminine Mystique hit the bookstores, the Saturday Evening Post published a cover article purporting to offer a portrait of the typical American woman. The opening page featured a photo of “Mrs. Charles Johnson,” surrounded by her husband and children. “I just want to take care of Charlie and the children,” the caption explained, summing up what the reader soon learned was the collective attitude of “American women, in toto.”

The Post’s story was based on more than 1,800 interviews and extensive polling by the Gallup organization. According to the author, George Gallup, it was not intended to examine “the extremes” among American women. “Old maids,” divorced women, childless women, and working mothers certainly existed in America, he acknowledged, but they were of concern mainly to sociologists, “because they are unusual” and exist “in a society that is not geared for them.” The article’s aim was to portray how “most” American women lived and thought.

As depicted in the Post article, the typical American woman—the one for whom American society was “geared”—was thirty-five years old, had two children (but was hoping for a third), and was a full-time homemaker. She had completed slightly more than three years of high school and had been happily married for fourteen years. And unstated though this was, she was white.

These demographic details meant that the woman they were describing had been born in 1927, just seven years after women won the vote.
As a young child, she would have experienced the Great Depression and almost certainly been aware of the tensions in the household as her parents struggled to get by. She had lived through World War II in her teen years, married a few years after the war's end, and was now taking care of her husband and raising children. But of course the Post survey included many slightly older women who had married before or during World War II as well as some who had started their families more recently.

Other publications and commentators, the Post editors wrote in the teaser for the article, had variously described American housewives “as lonely, bored, lazy, sexually inept, frigid, superficial, harried, militant, [and] overworked,” but the truth was that they were doing fine. While 40 percent of housewives admitted they sometimes wondered whether they would have been better off as a single career woman, only 7 percent said they were “sorry they chose marriage over career.” As one put it, “I’m my own boss. . . . My only deadline is when my husband comes home. I’m much more free than when I was single and working. A married woman has it made.”

Not surprisingly, given the contrast between their experience as housewives in the newly prosperous 1950s and their still vivid memories of the hardships of the Depression and World War II, three out of four women felt that they got more “fun out of life” than their parents. Almost 90 percent of the married women said that homemaking tasks were easier for them than they’d been for their mothers, and 60 percent believed that their marriages were happier than those of their parents. The typical housewife, the Post reported, spent several hours each day cleaning house and taking care of children, but also had time for telephone chats, personal visits, and hobbies such as sewing, reading, or gardening. In fact, observed Gallup, “few people are as happy as a housewife.”

American housewives are content, asserted Gallup, because they “know precisely why they’re here on earth.” Unlike men, women do not need to “search for a meaning in life. . . . Practically every one of the 1813 married women in this survey said that the chief purpose of her life was to be either a good mother or a good wife.”

The housewives expressed deep satisfaction about motherhood and often described childbirth as the high point of their lives. But, the pollsters observed, “it takes more than motherhood to make a woman completely happy; it also takes a man.” And not just any man. He “must be the leader; he cannot be subservient to the female.”

Women “repeatedly” told the interviewers that “the man should be number one.” One woman who had worked at a paid job for ten years before quitting to get married commented that “a woman needs a master-slave relationship whether it’s husband and wife or boss-secretary.” Another explained that “being subordinate to men is a part of being feminine.” A third wife declared that what made her “feel equal” was that she always put her husband first and spent her spare time broadening her interests “so I won’t bore” him.

One (unmarried) female newspaper reporter did comment that “a woman need not feel inferior while she makes her husband feel superior.” But what strikes the modern reader is the degree to which both the women and the pollsters took it for granted that a wife should defer to her husband. Gallup even noted that the task of interviewing so many women had been challenging because some husbands wouldn’t allow their wives to participate. One husband “was so angry that his wife had ‘talked to strangers’ that he refused to speak to her for three days after her interview.” Another remarked to the interviewers, “You talk to my wife as if you thought she knew what she was talking about.”

Yet neither Gallup nor the women portrayed in the article had any serious complaints about women’s status in society. “Apparently,” commented Gallup, “the American woman has all the rights she wants. . . . She’s content to know that if she wants to do [other] things, she can; no one is telling her she can’t, and she has made her choice—not business or politics, but marriage.”

Gallup found only two small imperfections in the lives of American housewives. One was what he described as the “rather plaintive” desire of wives for more praise from their husbands and children. One woman explained: “A man gets his satisfactions from his paycheck and from being
asked advice by others. A woman's prestige comes from her husband's opinions of her."

Still, women assured the pollsters that it wouldn't take much praise to make them happy because, all in all, they were "easily satisfied." "The female doesn't really expect a lot from life," explained one mother. "She's here as someone's keeper—her husband's or her children's."

Gallup's second concern was about these women, now so focused on marriage and motherhood, would do in "the empty years" after the children were grown. None of the respondents he interviewed mentioned this as a problem, but Gallup was troubled by their lack of forethought. "With early weddings and extended longevity, marriage is now a part-time career for women, and unless they prepare themselves for the freer years, this period will be a loss. American society will hardly accept millions of ladies of leisure—or female drones—in their 40s."

For the time being, however, his report concluded, "the typical American female" is "serene, secure and happy." She loves being a woman and is "well satisfied" with her achievements in life. How odd, then, that just a month later, two of the most influential women's magazines in the country would feature excerpts from a forthcoming book claiming that millions of housewives were in fact desperately unhappy.

A careful reader of the Post article might have noted a few signs that not all women the pollsters interviewed were feeling as serene as Gallup suggested. Even though 60 percent of the wives said their marriages were happier than those of their parents, and almost all felt their housework was easier, two-thirds of them did not believe they were doing a better job of child rearing than their mothers had. And 90 percent of them did not want their daughters to follow in their own footsteps, expressing the hope their daughters would get more education and marry later than they had. Furthermore, about half the "single girls," as the Post referred to all unmarried women no matter their age, and a third of the married ones "complained about inferior female status."

Nevertheless, the complaints were mild, and these women were certainly not feminist militants. Asked whether they thought it would be a good thing if America someday might have a female president, two-thirds said no.

We often look back on the 1960s as a decade of liberation. By the time The Feminine Mystique was published in 1963, the civil rights movement had reached new heights in its long struggle against segregationist laws and practices. McCarthyism still cast a long shadow over American political life, with many people afraid to acknowledge associations or ideas that might expose them to charges of being "subversives," "pinkos," or "fellow-travelers." But the tide of public opinion had begun to swing against the televised hearings where congressmen waved lists of suspected "reds" and demanded under threat of jail time that witnesses name everyone they knew who might ever have attended a left-wing meeting. On the nation's campuses, student groups were beginning to protest the strict rules set up by administrators acting in loco parentis. When it came to women, however, the laws, practices, and attitudes of 1963 had more in common with those of the first fifty years of the century than what was to come in the next twenty years.

The homemakers in the Saturday Evening Post article may have thought they were choosing to defer to their husbands, but they actually had few alternatives. Many states still had "head and master" laws, affirming that the wife was subject to her husband. And the expectation that husbands had the right to control what their wives did or even read was widespread. Many husbands forbade their wives to return to school or to get a job. In 1963, Marjorie Schmiege heard about The Feminine Mystique from her local librarian and showed the book to her closest friend, Jan, who lived down the block. The next day, Jan's husband told Marjorie's husband, "Tell Marj never to bring that book into my house again."

In many states, according to the President's Commission on the Status of Women, which issued its report on October 11, 1963, a wife had "no legal rights to any part of her husband's earnings or property during the existence of the marriage, aside from a right to be properly supported." The bar for what constituted proper support was set quite low. In one case that made it to the Kansas Supreme Court, a wife whose comfortably
well-off husband refused to install running water in her kitchen was rebuffed when she tried to make the case that this constituted less than adequate support. In community property states, a wife did have a legally recognized interest in the commonly owned property, above and beyond the right to receive basic support from it, but the husband generally had exclusive rights to manage and control that property.

Only four states allowed a wife the full right to a separate legal residence. When a woman married, most courts ruled, she “loses her domicile and acquires that of her husband, no matter where she resides, or what she believes or intends.” If a female student in California married a fellow student from out of state, for example, she would lose her in-state tuition. The husband had the right to determine the couple’s joint residence, so if he moved and she refused to follow, she could be said to have deserted him if he sought a divorce. Even when a wife lived apart from her husband, she could seldom rent or buy a home on her own. In 1972, the New York Times carried a story about a woman who could not rent an apartment until her husband, a patient in a mental hospital, signed the lease.

In many states, a woman was obliged to take her husband’s surname. In some, she could not return to her maiden name after divorce unless, under the fault-based divorce system, she had proven that he was “at fault.” A woman who did not change the name on her driver’s license or voter registration upon marriage could have it revoked until she did. In 1971, an Illinois bill to allow married women to use a different surname for legal purposes was defeated, partly on grounds that motel owners could not safeguard “public morals” if married couples could register as Miss Jane Doe and Mr. John Smith.

At least five states required women to receive court approval before opening a business in their own name. In Florida, a married woman who wished to operate a business independently of her husband had to present a petition that attested to “her character, habits, education and mental capacity for business” and explain why her “disability” to conduct a business should be removed. In 1966, an enterprising Texas woman turned this disability into an advantage, claiming that she shouldn’t be required to repay a loan she’d taken from the Small Business Administration, because she did not have a court decree removing her disability to enter contracts and therefore shouldn’t have been granted the loan in the first place. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld her claim.

Married or single, women had a much more difficult time than men in getting financial credit. Banks and credit card companies discriminated against single women, and if a single woman with her own credit card got married, they insisted that her husband become the legal account holder. In Illinois, Marshall Field’s department store would allow a woman to use her first name with her husband’s surname if she could prove she had an independent source of income. But in no case could she use her maiden name, explained a credit department spokesman, because “she no longer exists as a person under her maiden name.”

In issuing a mortgage or a loan, a wife’s income was taken into consideration only if she was at least forty years old or could present proof that she had been sterilized. Until 1967, if a married female veteran applied for a Veterans Administration loan, her own income was not considered in determining the couple’s credit risk.

The economic security of housewives who were not employed outside the home depended largely on a husband’s goodwill. Some states allowed husbands to mortgage their homes or dispose of jointly owned property without consulting their wives. Others held that rental income belonged solely to the husband. Still others permitted husbands, but not wives, to bequeath their share of the community property to someone other than their spouse. As of 1963, forty-two states and the District of Columbia considered earnings acquired during marriage to be owned separately. This meant that if a couple divorced and the wife had been a homemaker, she was not entitled to share the earnings her husband had accumulated.

The legal definition of marital duties made the man responsible for providing “necessaries” for his wife and children but allowed him to decide whether those included running water or new clothes. A wife’s legal duties were to rear the children and provide services around the home. This is why, if a man’s wife was injured or killed, he could sue the responsible
person or corporation for loss of consortium, but a woman could not do so, because she was not legally entitled to such personal services from her husband.

Such double standards were found throughout the law. Almost all states allowed females to marry at a considerably younger age than men, on the grounds that the responsibilities of a wife did not require the same level of maturity as those of a husband. In Kentucky, a husband could win a divorce if he could prove that his wife committed a single act of adultery, but a wife could not be granted a divorce unless she discovered that her husband was regularly cheating on her. If she had sex with him after finding this out, he could argue that she had forgiven him, and the judge could deny her petition for divorce. Several states allowed a man to divorce a woman if she was pregnant at the time of marriage, “without his knowledge or agency,” but no state allowed a woman to divorce her husband if she discovered that he had impregnated another woman prior to their marriage.

The sexual double standard even extended to murder. New Mexico, Utah, and Texas were among states that had statutes codifying the so-called unwritten law that a man was entitled to kill someone he discovered in the act of sexual intercourse with his wife. Such a circumstance could be introduced as “a complete defense” against the charge of homicide. No state allowed a wife to kill a woman she caught having sex with her husband.

It was perfectly legal to ask prospective female employees about their family plans and to make hiring decisions based on the answers. When author Susan Jacoby applied for a reporting job in 1965 as a childless nineteen-year-old, she was asked to write an essay on “How I plan to combine motherhood with a career.” There were no laws preventing employers from firing female employees if they married or got pregnant, or from refusing to hire married women or mothers at all.

One man I interviewed noted that his wife had had experience working with early computers before they married, and when she tried to go back to work at the end of the 1950s, she sought a similar job with IBM. "After taking IBM’s specialized exam, she was told that no one had previously scored that high. However, they could not hire her, they said, because they did not place women in the kind of position she qualified for."

One seemingly glamorous job for women in the early 1960s was that of stewardess, but many airline companies required women to quit work upon marriage, and all insisted that they could not work after having a child. Women were expected to resign as soon as they became pregnant. When one airline discovered that a stewardess had kept her child a secret for three years while she continued working, they offered her the choice of resigning or putting her child in an orphanage. Another airline in the 1960s had a unique form of maternity leave: If a woman had a miscarriage or if her child died within a year, she could return to her job with no loss of seniority.

In 1963 and 1964, newspapers still divided their employment ads into two separate sections, “Help Wanted/Female” and “Help Wanted/Male.” The advertisements in the Sunday New York Times of April 7, 1963, are typical. The “Help Wanted/Female” section was filled with ads such as: “Secretary (atrac) . . . good typ & steno”; “Pretty-looking, cheerful gal for Mad Aveagy”; “poised, attractive girl for top exec” in a law firm; “Exec Secy . . . Attractive please!” A particularly demanding employer stipulated “you must be really beautiful.” One company atypically sought a “career minded college educated” candidate for an executive secretary but specified that she must be single. A few sought Ivy League grads, but the main job requirement for such prospective employees was ‘good typing skills.’

The male section included 281 ads for accountants and 153 for chemists, while the female section had just 9 ads in each of those job categories. Eleven ads sought men for attorney positions, but none sought women. There were 29 columns of “Sales Help Wanted/Male” but only 2 columns of “Sales Help Wanted/Female.” The “Help Wanted/Male” section had 94 ads for management trainee positions, while only 2 such ads appeared in the women’s job section.

On the other hand, the female section of the want ads contained 162 ads for gal Fridays and girl Fridays, 459 for secretaries, 159 for receptionists,
and 122 for typists. Similarly, there were 119 ads for "Household Help Wanted/Female," but just 5 for "Household Help Wanted/Male." One ad, reflecting the racialized as well as gendered nature of job opportunities, touted dependable, live-in maids from the "Miss Dixie Employment Agency," catering to the many white middle-class families that imported African-American servants from the South. Another ad, however, specified that the "Waitress-Parlor maid" they wanted to hire must be "White, well experienced."

Once hired, working women, single or married, were discriminated against in pay, promotion, and daily treatment on the job. In 1963, women who worked full-time earned only 60 percent of what men earned; black women earned only 42 percent. On average, a woman with four years of college still earned less than a male high school graduate.

Women could lose their jobs if their employer no longer considered them "attractive." Airline officials forced flight attendants to retire in their early thirties because, as one company official explained, "the average woman's appearance has markedly deteriorated at this age." Another matter-of-factly explained the business considerations behind the policy: "It's the sex thing, pure and simple. Put a dog on a plane and 20 businessmen are sore for a month."

There was no recourse against what we now call sexual harassment. One high school boy who worked a summer job in a newspaper room in 1964 wrote in his diary that when he entered the compositing room with Doris, the copy girl, "all of the printers and linotype operators started screaming and howling. At first I didn’t understand what was going on, but then I figured it out: They were doing it to Doris." When he asked Doris what it meant, she responded, "It's just how they act around women." The boy found the incident startling, but once it was explained to him, he simply accepted it, as Doris had to do, as the way work was conducted in those days.

Women also had little control over their sexual and reproductive destinies in 1963. In 1958, New York City had finally prohibited its hospitals from denying contraceptive counseling to patients, after a newspaper reporter discovered that the city commissioner of hospitals had ordered the chief of obstetrics at Kings County General Hospital not to fit a diaphragm for a diabetic mother of three who had already had two cesarean section deliveries. But in 1963, seventeen states still restricted women's access to contraceptives. Massachusetts flatly prohibited their sale and made it a misdemeanor for anyone, even a married couple, to use birth control. Not until 1965 did the Supreme Court rule that it was an unconstitutional invasion of privacy to deny married women access to contraceptives. It took several more years for unmarried women to obtain equal access to birth control.

In many states, it was illegal for a woman to wear men's clothing, and every state in the union had "sodomy" laws that criminalized sexual relations other than heterosexual intercourse. In California, oral sex, even between a married couple, carried a potential jail term of fourteen years.

Abortion was still illegal everywhere, except to save a woman's life. In 1962, local Phoenix television celebrity Sherri Finkbine, a married mother of four and pregnant with her fifth child, discovered that thalidomide, the sleeping pill she had been prescribed, was known in Europe to have caused crippling and life-threatening fetal disorders. Her doctor recommended a therapeutic abortion, but when Finkbine went public with the news about the risks of thalidomide, the hospital canceled her appointment. Finkbine was forced to go to Sweden for the abortion, where doctors determined that the fetus was too deformed to have survived.

Few women had the resources to get around the laws by flying to Europe. Experts estimated that a million or more illegal abortions a year were performed on American women, with between 5,000 and 10,000 women dying as a result. Such abortions accounted for 40 percent of maternal deaths.

Unmarried women who became pregnant and gave birth faced extreme social stigma, especially in white communities where the new but still tenuous prosperity of the 1950s had created a burning desire, as one woman told me, to "fit in so you could move up." In her words, "having an unwed child in the family just shut you right out of respectable society."
When her own daughter got pregnant, this woman pressured her to go away, have the baby in secret, put it up for adoption, and come back pretending that she had been visiting relatives.

That this was common is confirmed by the testimony Ann Fessler recounts in *The Girls Who Went Away*. More than 25,000 babies a year were surrendered for adoption in the early 1960s, many because young women were persuaded they had no other option. As one later told Fessler: “You couldn’t be an unwed mother... If you weren’t married, your child was a bastard and those terms were used.” “Nobody ever asked me if I wanted to keep the baby, or explained the options,” said another. “I went to the maternity home, I was going to have the baby, they were going to take it, and I was going to go home. I was not allowed to keep the baby. I would have been disowned.”

Before World War II, maternity homes had encouraged unwed mothers to breast-feed after birth and did not pressure them to give away the child, but in the postwar era the philosophy had changed. While young black women who had babies were considered immoral, young white ones were considered neurotic or immature, and by the 1960s many homes put tremendous pressure on them to give up their children. One woman recalled, “I was not allowed to call the father of my child. Even when we would write letters, they would read them. They would either cut out things they didn’t like in them, or they would cross through what they didn’t like. If the letter really upset them, they would throw it away in front of us or tear it up.”

If a woman did keep a child, she and her child faced legal as well as social discrimination. Many companies refused to hire unwed mothers. Children born out of wedlock had the word “illegitimate” stamped on their birth certificates and school records. They had no right to inherit from their fathers, to collect debts owed to their mother if she died, or even to inherit from the mother’s parents should the mother predecease them. Until 1968, the child of an unwed mother could not sue for wrongful death if the mother was killed by medical malpractice or employer malfeasance. Until 1972, “illegitimate” children who lived with their father could not collect workers’ compensation death benefits if he died on the job.

There was seldom justice for women who were raped. Most state penal codes permitted defense lawyers to impeach a woman’s testimony by introducing evidence of previous consensual sex or claiming she had “invited” the rape by wearing “revealing” clothes or “tight” dresses. Many judges required corroboration that was almost impossible to achieve, such as having an eyewitness testify to the rape. In North Carolina, an older man could not be convicted of the statutory rape of a young girl if he could convince a judge or jury she had not been a virgin.

The law did not recognize that a married woman could be raped by her husband. Once a woman said “I do,” she was assumed to have said “I will” for the rest of her married life. The courts held that the marriage vows implied consent to intercourse. Not until 1975 did the first state—South Dakota—make spousal rape a crime. North Carolina did not do so until 1993.

Many states also did not take domestic violence seriously, often requiring police officers to see a man assault his wife before they could make an arrest. In some places, the police used the “stitch rule,” arresting an abusing husband only if the wife’s injuries required more than a certain number of sutures. Until 1981, Pennsylvania still had a law against a husband beating his wife after 10 P.M. or on Sunday, implying that the rest of the time she was fair game.

A 1964 article in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*, published by the American Medical Association, reported on a study of thirty-seven women whose husbands had physically abused them. The authors observed that the wives typically did not call the police until more than a decade after the abuse began, often following an incident where a teenage child intervened in the violence. But rather than lamenting the women’s long delay in seeking assistance, the psychiatrists explained that the child’s intervention disturbed “a marital equilibrium which had been working more or less satisfactorily.” To hear them tell it, most problems in such marriages were the fault of the wives, whom they described as “aggressive, efficient,
masculine, and sexually frigid." In many cases, the psychiatrists suggested, the violent incidents served as periodic corrections to the unhealthy family role reversal, allowing the wife "to be punished for her castrating activity" and the husband "to re-establish his masculine identity."

Prejudice and discrimination were pervasive in small things as well as big. Elementary schools did not allow girls to be crossing guards or to raise and lower the American flag each day, nor could girls play in Little League sports. Many universities still required female students to wear dresses to class, even in bitterly cold weather. Women in dormitories faced curfew restrictions that men did not, and college sports were heavily skewed toward men. Often, women couldn't even use school athletic facilities.

Only two of the eight Ivy League schools accepted female undergraduates, while graduate departments often capped the number of women they would admit. Unions routinely kept separate seniority lists for men and women, while professional associations limited the number of female members. In 1963, only 2.6 percent of all attorneys were female, and among the 422 federal judges in the nation, just 3 were women. Not until 1984 did the Supreme Court rule that law firms could not discriminate on the basis of sex in deciding which lawyers in the firm to promote to partner.

Clubs such as the Jaycees could legally refuse to admit women on the grounds that it abridged their male members' "freedom of intimate association." In 1963, the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., was still entirely male. Female reporters who went there to hear a talk by black union leader A. Philip Randolph just before the August 1963 rally where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech had to sit in a small balcony away from the rest of the audience, where they were not able to ask questions. And at that historic rally for equality, not one woman was among the ten speakers, although "Mrs. Medgar Evers" did introduce a tribute to six "Negro women fighters for freedom," who stood silently on the stage.

In 1957, the federal government finally passed an act ensuring women's right to serve on federal juries, but when The Feminine Mystique came off the press six years later, only twenty-nine states allowed women to serve equally with men on city and state juries. In 1963, women, who were 51 percent of the population, composed just 2 percent of U.S. senators and ambassadors and 2.5 percent of U.S. representatives.

Advice books for girls and women hammered home the idea that a woman's greatest goal should be to get married and that she should bury her own interests and impulses in order to please and flatter a man into proposing. Even today some advice books for females are based on this idea, but such books stand out today precisely because they are out of step with mainstream mores. In 1963, Helen Andelin self-published Fascinating Womanhood, which became a runaway best seller when it was picked up by a mainstream publishing house in 1965. Andelin counseled women that the way to a happy marriage was to become "the perfect follower." She urged them to cultivate a "girlish trust" in their man and never to "appear to know more than he does." A woman should never let her voice exhibit such qualities as "loudness, firmness, efficiency, boldness." While it was okay to get angry, she told them, you should be sure to display only "childlike anger," which included "stomping your feet" and scolding your man in terms that flattered his sense of masculinity, such as "you big hairy beast."

An article in the January 1960 McCall's, "Look Before You Leap," presented a list of questions for prospective brides to answer before they married. The magazine urged the woman to be sure she would be able to press her husband's trousers, iron his shirts, and cook meals he liked. It also asked: "Has he pointed out things about you that he doesn't like, and have you changed because of what he's said?" The correct answer, of course, was yes, but women's magazines and advice books were unanimous in warning women against pointing out anything they didn't like in their mates.

Once they were married, women's work was truly never done. Typical of the advice to wives at the dawn of the 1960s was a piece in the December 18, 1960, issue of Family Weekly magazine, inspired by the fact that the student council of New York University's college of engineering regularly presented "Good Wife" certificates to "worthy" wives whose "encouragement, collaboration, and understanding" had helped their husbands complete their degrees. "Could You Win this 'Good Wife'
Certificate?” asked the author, a noted marital advice authority of the day. He proceeded to enumerate what it took to make the grade: A good wife makes her husband “feel that he is the boss at home.” She “shares her husband’s goals, fitting them to her own. She is willing to wait patiently for the ultimate rewards.” She understands that “physical love is a symbol of devotion rather than an end in itself, and she is aware that such physical need is usually greater in the male.” For this reason, she “never makes him feel inadequate.” In conversations, the good wife permits her husband “to take the lead” without interrupting. “She follows an open door policy” for his friends, “even if she finds them dull or sometimes disagreeable.” But she also respects her husband’s need for privacy, so “she learns when to keep quiet. . . . If he’d rather read or watch a ball game on television, she avoids disturbing him with idle chatter.”

Above all, like the women described in the December 1962 Saturday Evening Post article, a “good wife” considers “homemaking her profession.” “She makes every effort to keep their home . . . a restful haven.” And “she does not insist” that her husband share in household chores or child care: “her mate isn’t converted into a ‘mother substitute.’” Finally, if “she has a part-time career or full-time job, it doesn’t take priority in her life, and her own work should not become more important to her than his.”

Although advice books often emphasized the tremendous intellectual effort required to manage household chores, the expectations for housewives’ intelligence were pretty low. Many newspapers had columns such as the Washington Post’s “Anne’s Readers’ Exchange,” where women sent in helpful hints about organizing housework more efficiently. On October 17, 1963, the Post printed a letter from one reader who had devised what Anne labeled “a tricky chore combination”: “this homemaker claims she can iron and telephone at the same time.”

As late as 1969, famed parenting advice author Dr. Benjamin Spock was still reiterating the opinion of most medical and psychiatric authorities that “women were made to be concerned first and foremost with child care, husband care, and home care.”

Even well-educated women who themselves worked outside the home joined the chorus. Margaret Mead, a famous anthropologist who had traveled the world and was highly unconventional in her own personal life, wrote several articles expressing concerns about women who sought status or fulfillment in the “competitive world rather than a unique place by a glowing hearth.” Frances Perkins, who had been secretary of labor for twelve years under Franklin D. Roosevelt, insisted that “the happiest place for most women is in the home.” And although the 1963 report of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women decried the extent of inequality in political life, it too affirmed the centrality of women’s identity as wives and mothers, noting that women’s employment might threaten family life.

It is hard for women today to realize how few role models were available to women who came of age in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. Black female civil rights leaders spoke out, faced down mobs, and braved jail, but the only women regularly featured in the news were movie stars and presidents’ wives, who were always described by their outfits. Jo Freeman, who would become a leader of the women’s movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, recalled that during the four years in the early 1960s she studied at the University of California at Berkeley, one of the country’s largest institutions of higher education, “I not only never had a woman professor, I never even saw one. Worse yet, I didn’t notice.”

In 1964, the same year Friedan’s book came out in paperback, the most blatant discriminatory practices of the era should have come to a halt. In that year the Civil Rights Bill passed, with a last-minute amendment to prohibit discrimination by sex as well as by race, color, religion, and national origin. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was set up to enforce the law. But while the EEOC immediately ruled that job ads specifying a particular race violated the act, it balked at concluding the same for ads segregated by sex. The New York Times did not abolish gender-segregated ads until 1968.

In September 1965, activists in the stewardesses’ union managed to get a hearing before the House Labor subcommittee to protest the airlines’ policy of forcing them to retire when they reached their early thirties, but the legislators failed to take their complaints seriously. Representative James Scheuer, a liberal who by his 1991 retirement supported women’s
rights, facetiously asked the complaining women to “stand up, so we can see the dimensions of the problem.” It took the EEOC several years to start enforcing the laws against sex discrimination, and not until 1971 did the Supreme Court invalidate a single state statute on the grounds of sex discrimination.

These attitudes eventually spurred women activists, including Betty Friedan, who had become a celebrity after The Feminine Mystique was published, to stop working through established channels and to found an organization devoted to ending all forms of sex discrimination. But when she was writing The Feminine Mystique in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Friedan did not choose to tackle issues of legal, economic, and political discrimination. Instead, she asked her readers to take a closer look at the supposedly happy housewife described in articles such as that of the Saturday Evening Post.

The Feminine Mystique did not challenge the assertion that most housewives believed their “chief purpose” was to be wives and mothers. Nor did Friedan complain, as some intellectuals had already begun to do in the 1950s, that women were too content as housewives. Instead, The Feminine Mystique argued that beneath the daily routines and surface contentment of most housewives’ lives lay a deep well of insecurity, self-doubt, and unhappiness that they could not articulate even to themselves. And in describing that unhappiness as something more than an individual case of “the blues,” Friedan unleashed a wave of recognition and relief in thousands of women. Some of them had already realized that they were “unusual” and not “geared” for what society wanted of them. But many would have agreed with the women who told Gallup and his colleagues that their lives were easier than those of their own parents. Until they read Friedan, that had only made it harder for them to understand why they were not as delighted with those lives as Mrs. Charles Johnson appeared to be.

Naming the Problem: Friedan’s Message to American Housewives

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning. . . . Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?”

—Page 1, The Feminine Mystique

The opening paragraph of Friedan’s book is one of the two or three passages that women who read the book in the first years after its publication still remember most vividly.

“Everything just clicked,” said Sally A., who read it as a thirty-two-year-old housewife in Kansas. She told me she had often wondered whether she should see a psychiatrist because of her tendency to cry “for no reason” in the middle of the afternoon. “But I couldn’t afford it, and I was too much the daughter of my working-class folks to imagine doing something as self-indulgent as paying someone good money to talk about myself. Reading that book, though, it was like reading what I would have said to her if we’d been able to sit down for a cup of coffee.”