The Hell of Home and Hearth:
Constructing the 1950s Housewife

Who was the '1950s housewife?' Was she a continuation of an established tradition, or a new phenomenon? How has her image been constructed and reimagined over time?

The '1950s housewife' is an instantly recognisable and widely employed historical trope. However, ever since the emergence of gender history in the 1960s, linked to the women's liberation movement, a debate has raged about who this 'housewife' was and what she represents. Feminist historians perceive that gender roles and characteristics are not a 'natural' occurrence, but rather a social construction surrounding biological sex.[1] As such, it is not only the 1950s housewife's material realities that are contested, but the existence of gaps between her representation and reality, as well as the implications for ideologies about feminine ideals and what empowers women. Although assigned to the 1950s, the housewife as a theoretical category is seen from the end of the Second World War and into the early 1960s, before second-wave feminism became a highly visible movement. It is an idea mostly applied in the cultural 'West;' including America, Western Europe and Australia. Historiographic contention begins on the most basic level with the attempt to define the housewife, but the enduring wider historical theme of change as to continuity is also a familiar battleground. Perhaps the most fascinating area of study, are the ways in which second-wave

[1] Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, "Gender and History," in *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory,* eds Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.253.

feminism constructed the role of the housewife as their ideological opposition and how third-wave feminism has begun to reimagine her. The popular conception of the 'age of housewives' is a myth; but like many myths it contains elements of truth. One part of the story of the 1950s has been amplified and imposed on all.

The first task of a historian studying the idea of the 1950s housewife is to try to define what they mean by a term that often carries subconscious assumptions due to its frequent off-hand use. In popular history this is generally treated as an unproblematic task. Virginia Nicholson titled her collection of first-hand stories of 1950s women *Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes*, to point towards the 'omnipresent and inescapable 1950s fantasy world' where 'for a generation of women—and men—marriage and home were the twin pinnacles of aspiration.'[2] She began by discussing how her mother pursued these ideals as she 'exclusively shopped, cooked, cleaned, mended, scrubbed, laundered and baby-minded with very little help.'[3] Evidence to support the idea that 1950s women just wanted to look after their husband and home is easy to find. Popular culture from the era seems saturated with 'happy housewives' who wanted nothing more than to perfect their baking recipes for their husbands. Family sitcoms on early television moralised about gender roles and reinforced the idea that a woman's place was in the home. In the 1956 *Father Knows Best* episode 'Betty, Girl Engineer,' the teenage daughter signs up for work experience as a surveyor.[4] First her parents try to discourage her, then she encounters outright hostility on the placement, before finally she submits by dropping the notion and changing into a girly dress when a love interest despairs: 'if the nice pretty girls

[2] Virginia Nicholson, *Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: The Story of Women in the 1950s* (London: Random House, 2015), Foreword.
[3] *Ibid.,* Foreword.
[4] "Betty, Girl Engineer," *Father Knows Best*, Directed by Peter Tewksbury, CBS, 1956.

are going to be out there in the dust too [working 'male' jobs] who are the guys going to come home to?'[5] These attitudes about women serving men were not just represented in fiction. The *Saturday Evening Post* in a 1962 cover story about the 'normal' American woman included the astounding quote of one housewife explaining that "a woman needs a master-slave relationship whether it's husband and wife or boss-secretary."[6]

Nicholson's compilation is full of women recounting this well-trodden ground. Liz Jones recalls being advised by a suitor that he could not marry her unless she toned down what he perceived to be an excessive social life: "I was so besotted with him I just gave up doing all the things I liked."[7] Oral history such as this is a great asset for the study of social history, helping to uncover subjective experiences missing from official records. Yet analysing oral evidence does come with its own challenges. It is worth considering how the experiences and changing gender discourses of the 60 years or so that have passed before these stories have been recounted, may have influenced how Nicholson's sources remember the original events. It is also worth analysing how Nicholson chose her subjects and what questions she asked, which could have influenced her results. Nicholson's introduction based on the author's own experience of her mother, hints at the kind of underlying assumptions that form her starting point. Glenn Whitman argues that "all historical sources should be treated with equal scepticism. Such scepticism should also be turned on [ourselves] as interviewers."[8] While it cannot be assumed that these memories present the full story, a historian must also be wary

[5] "Betty, Girl Engineer."
[6] Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), p.3.
[7] Nicholson, *Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes*, ch.2.
[8] R. Kenneth Kirby, "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History," *Oral History Review* 35, no.1 (2008): p.24.

of invalidating women's experiences; a process which would defeat one of the core purposes of gender history of empowering women. Luisa Passerini argues that "the guiding principle should be that all autobiographical memory is true; it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, for which purpose."[9] If the women's stories have changed over time, that is valuable for historians in itself.

There has long been a divide between popular consensus and the academic study of 1950s women. Caitríona Beaumont is one of the many historians who attempts to challenge a simplistic perception of the housewife that 'limits our understandings of women's past lives, their diverse experiences of domesticity and their ability to enjoy life and to control their own destinies.'[10] The starting point for complicating the pervasive image of the housewife is to acknowledge that while many women stayed at home after having a family, a significant proportion of women did not. In America in 1950, 28.3 percent of women with children between six and 17 years old worked, increasing to 39.8 percent by the end of the decade.[11] In 1951, 44 percent of female workers in the UK were married; by 1960, one in six of the whole labour force was a married women.[12] This is not to say that women were in any way treated as equal to men in the workforce; women's work was still mostly low-paid and low-status.[13] However, the fact that they worked at all seems to have been lost from popular memory. This is partly because mainstream sources are often accepted at face value and as

[9] Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, "Oral History," in *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory,* eds Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p.236.
[10] Caitríona Beaumont, "What Do Women Want?: Housewives' Associations, Activism and Changing Representations of Women in the 1950s," *Women's History* (2016): p.2.
[11] Elizabeth Walman, "Labor Force Statistics from a Family Perspective," *Bureau of Labour Statistics*, 1983, p.18.
[12] Beaumont, "What Do Women Want?," p.3.
[13] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, p.10.

the complete story. Stephanie Coontz offers an interesting argument that the media focuses on new developments; in the 1950s this was the mass movement to the suburbs by middle class couples looking to start families.[14] As such there was a disproportional focus in 1950s popular media on the suburban home with a stay at home mother.[15]

Although the overwhelming contemporary perception of 1950s popular culture focuses on the 'happy housewife' stereotype, for those who care to look for it, there is also plentiful evidence of broader representations of women. When Joanne Meyerowitz sampled 489 articles about women in popular women's magazines, she found that 60 percent of them celebrated individual achievement, particularly unusual talents and careers, as well as female celebrities.[16] Although this includes a degree of subjective interpretation, Meyerowitz's study does present a challenge to the common consensus that 1950s media acted as propagators of 'housewife propaganda.' Popular magazines acknowledged that many women worked. In 1956 a headline in *The Housewife's Companion* proclaimed "The Married Woman Goes Back to Work" and argued that "women's hard-won right to work outside the home has developed into a powerful urge to work."[17] However even if women were employed, they were still assumed to also be conscientious homemakers. A 1960 General Foods advertisement explained "these days a woman's world doesn't stop at the kitchen door," but continued with

[14] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, p.64.
[15] *Ibid.,* p.64.
[16] Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," *The Journal of American History* 70, no.4 (1993): p.1458.
[17]Nancy Walker, *Shaping our Mother's World: American Mother's Magazines* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p.209.

the important caveat that a woman still needed to cook for her husband: "even the busiest schedule must leave time for him."[18]

Perhaps the strongest historiographic divide is the question of the 1950s housewife's degree of agency. The dominant image of the housewife's world is limited to the home and hearth, totally isolated from the public domain. Certainly women in the 1950s were largely excluded from formal political positions, but this does not mean they were entirely absent from this world. [19] Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd argue that Australian housewives' associations demonstrate how many women embraced their role as a homemaker as a political identity and campaigned for issues that affected them, such as free kindergartens and nurseries.[20] Women's groups may have featured 'traditional' female pursuits, but they were also a way of giving a woman a separate identity and purpose beyond the walls of her home. In Britain in 1949, the Minister for Education addressed the National Federation of Women's Institutes celebrating that they were "encouraging the housewife to believe in herself as a person […] not just as her husband's missus or the mum of her children, the mender of clothes, the cooker of meals."[21]

Despite the lived experiences of women complicating the image of the homebound housewife, she was clearly a celebrated ideal in the 1950s. The focus on creating families and conforming to gender roles was seen as the way to return to 'normal,' after the drastic

[18] Walker, *Shaping our Mother's World*, p.210.
[19] Beaumont, "What Do Women Want?, p.2.
[20] Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife (*Sydney: Berg Publishers, 2004), p.31.
[21] Beaumont, "What Do Women Want?, p.1.

upheaval of the Second World War.[22] The burgeoning field of popular psychology strongly focused on family dynamics. John Bowlby's Attachment Theory argued that if a child has disrupted care from his mother in his early years, he will face irreversible long-term damage.[23] Popular media also expressed a, generally unfounded, moral panic about children growing up with a working mother being the cause of teenage delinquency. In a 1956 *Sydney Morning Herald* article, educationalist Donald McLean argued that it had been proven beyond doubt that teenagers became delinquent due to decreased parenting in their infancy.[24] The many women who did not embody the devoted housewife ideal most likely felt significant pressure to do so.

The next significant question for historians to address after attempting to define the housewife, is considering whether she was a continuation of tradition, or something new. The tension between historical narratives of change as to continuity is a common experience across all areas of historiography. Judith Bennett in 'Confronting Continuity' argues that since the challenge of New History, there has been a focus on continuity, as a part of moving away from event-based history, with the notable exception of women's history which celebrates transformation narratives.[25] This is generally true for larger-scale gender histories, but for the 1950s housewife the popular story is usually about women continuing traditional roles after the temporary disruption of war; in line with the dominant discourse of 1950s media and politics about their own time. It conforms to a simple timeline narrative, where Western

[22] Beaumont, "What Do Women Want?, p.3.
[23] Marga Vicedo, "The Social Nature of the Mother's Tie to Her Child: John Bowlby's Theory of Attachment in Post-War America," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 44, no.3 (2011): p.203.
[24] Keith Moore, "Bodgies, Widgies and Moral Panic in Australia 1955 – 1959" (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 2004), p.4.
[25] Judith M. Bennett, "Confronting Continuity," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no.3 (1997): p.73.

women's rights are seen to have progressed slowly over centuries in a linear fashion. Of course, like most simple linear stories, the reality is much messier.

Coontz argues that although 'many observers mistakenly believe that the family norms of that era [the 1950s] were natural or traditional,' the post-Second World War increase in marriages and births was not the usual short-lived 'correction' expected after war separates men and women.[26] Béla Tomka in her *A Social History of Twentieth- Century Europe*, presents clear evidence that 1950s domesticity was not just a continuation of life before the Second World War.[27] In Western Europe, from the turn of the century until the Second World War, the average age of marriage was around 28 for men and 26 for women.[28] This dropped by 2 to 3 years for men and by 3 to 4 years for women in the decades after the war.[29] This eagerness to marry was also clear in America, where 71.1 percent of men and 67.4 percent of women over 15 were married by 1960, compared to 54.6 percent of men and 57 percent of women in 1900.[30] Tomka argues that 'the willingness to marry was greater in Western Europe in the two decades after the Second World War than was known at any time in history before.'[31]

Creating a cohesive metanarrative about the changing role of women in the 1950s is a very difficult task, as alongside this escalating domesticity, in what appears to be a contradictory trajectory, women's employment was also increasing. During the period in America,

[26] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, p.51.
[27] Béla Tomka, *A Social History of Twentieth- Century Europe* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).
[28] *Ibid*., p.51.
[29] *Ibid*., p.51.
[30] US Census Bureau, "20th Century Statistics," in *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1999, p.873.
[31] Tomka, *A Social History of Twentieth- Century Europe,* p.59.

employed wives tripled and employed mothers quadrupled.[32] However this cannot be celebrated as an unproblematic advance for women, as the wage gap between men and women continued to widen.[33] A similar incongruity can be seen in education where white women in the 1950s were twice as likely to go to college as their mothers had been, but women only earned 9 percent of PhDs, as to a previous 20 percent in the 1920s.[34]

Even if women's employment and educational opportunities were progressing in the 1950s, social attitudes were not. The habit of studying recent history in insular decade blocks means that the post-war years are often only compared to the war-time, and the ways in which they contrast to the pre-war years can be forgotten. Birgitte Søland in her book *Becoming Modern* discusses the social upheaval of the 1920s as young women self-consciously embraced an idea of modernity.[35] The fashion of the decade celebrated a childlike figure, rather than womanly curves, and embraced short drop-waist dresses and bobbed hair.[36] There is little trace of this to be seen in the return to curves and flared dresses of the 1950s. The stories Søland shares contrast fundamentally with the 1950s voices in Nicholson's book; one woman declared in a newspaper that she is "not going to let my husband be boss. That is much too old-fashioned."[37] Yet Bennett's work does act as a significant caveat to this story of predominantly change, as she argues that there is 'a critical distinction between change in women's experiences and transformation in women's status.'[38] None of these fluctuating

[32] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, p.59.
[33] Ibid., p.112.
[34] Ibid., p.60 & p.110.
[35] Birgitte Søland, *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.3.
[36] *Ibid*., p.22.
[37] *Ibid*., p.117.
[38] Bennett, "Confronting Continuity," p.73.

patterns of domesticity and employment change the fact that women were perceived to be, and treated as, the inferior sex.

The challenges of defining the housewife and her position in history are exacerbated by the contemporary implications of doing so. Although all historiographical approaches can have political applications, gender history is particularly self-consciously political. It is no coincidence that the gender turn emerged alongside second-wave feminism in the 1960s; they each inspired and informed the other. Gerda Lerner argues that "to be without history is to be trapped in a present where oppressive social relations appear natural and inevitable."[39] Thus, to expose the ways in which gender roles and expectations have been arbitrarily constructed, is to support an argument that they can be changed. This certainly does not mean that all feminist historians agree on how to represent women in the past, just that their histories may be influenced by what they want to find. Yet it would be unfair to disproportionately judge feminist historians for this issue, just because their purposes are most clearly presented, as all historians face this challenge. As E. H. Carr argued, because of the selective nature of the research process 'by and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants.'[40]

At the heart of second-wave feminism was an attempt to break free from what it saw to be the suffocating world of the 1950s housewife. In setting up the housewife as a neat ideological 'other,' feminists redefined and limited the identity associated with the trope. Bennett argues

[39] Green and Troup, "Gender and History," p.253.
[40] E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p.6.

that popular feminist texts of the 1960s and 70s were often 'essentialist' and 'portrayed women as passive victims, overlooking not only women's agency but also women's collusion in sexual oppression.'[41] Germaine Greer in her landmark 1970 book *The Female Eunuch* argued fervently that the housewife had no agency, but rather they were 'the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description.'[42] The nuances of women's experiences were lost beneath a metanarrative of women needing rescuing from their imprisonment. Johnson and Lloyd argue that the blindness to the diversity of women's experiences and representations in the 1950s meant that 'the "happy housewife myth" was not a product of popular culture but itself a myth – a myth of a myth – conjured up by feminism.'[43]

Popular history during the women's liberation movement did not only help solidify the stereotype of the 1950s housewife, it simplified women's historical progression. Betty Friedan's influential book *The Feminine Mystique* argued that women in the 1950s 'learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for.'[44] Although first-wave feminism dissipated without the rallying cause of suffrage, there is little evidence that women of the 1950s did not appreciate their hard-won political rights. In fact, women had a strong influence on the political landscape of the 1950s with Eisenhower particularly targeting women in his campaigns, such as the 1956 television advertisement 'Women

[41] Bennett, "Confronting Continuity," p.77.
[42] Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1970), p.328.
[43] Johnson and Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life*, p.11.
[44] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1963), p.5.

Voters' which depicted women speaking about the election issues they cared about most.[45] The fact that 61 percent of women, compared with 55 percent of men, supported Eisenhower in 1956, stands against the stereotype that women followed the political lead of their husbands.[46] Walter Davenport argued in *Collier's Weekly* in 1956 that 'nowadays it's often the woman of the house who keeps her tired businessman posted on campaign issues.'[47]

Friedan set out to inspire women, reminding them of the achievements of first-wave feminism and the "sense of possibility" espoused by pioneering women in the 1920s, 30s and 40s.[48] However historians, such as Coontz, critique Friedan's exaggeration of both the popular approval of feminism in the pre-war years and the anti-feminism backlash post-war.[49] Friedan even altered her own story to fit the persona of a housewife finding enlightenment.[50] Yet despite these issues, Friedan's book contained enough truth that thousands of women recognised themselves in its pages, thus achieving its purpose of validating many women's desire for more than their current domesticity. One woman exclaimed that the book described her frustrations "perfectly" and that realising she was not alone "came as such a relief."[51]

[45] Museum of the Moving Image, "The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952-2012," n.d., www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1956/women-voters
[46] Elizabeth Anne Oldmixon, *Uncompromising Positions: God, Sex, and the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), p.52.
[47] Walter Davenport, "Where Men Go Wrong About Women Voters," *Collier's Weekly*, September 14, 1956, p.34.
[48] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, p. 36.
[49] *Ibid.,* p.38.
[50] *Ibid.,* p.xix.
[51] *Ibid.*, p.26.

While second-wave feminism's construction of 1950s women resonated with many, it simultaneously rendered invisible the experiences of women outside of the white middle class. One working class African American woman dismissed *The Feminine Mystique* as about "white women [who] had the luxury of being bored with their middle class, full-time homemaker role, a role that most working women would cherish."[52] Many working class women, who had no choice but to undertake paid work, were confused by the premise of the book: "it wasn't that hard to go get a job […] and having a job sure didn't solve all my problems as a wife and mother."[53] This does not negate the reality of housewives struggling to feel fulfilled, but challenges its position as the main narrative of the 1950s. The colour-blindness of 1960s feminists is most likely linked to the writers' own experiences and the sources that they referred to. However, as a descendent of social history, gender history should be able to see the voices that are hidden behind mainstream media. The habit of studying Black history separately makes it easy to forget that at the same time as the 1950s housewife was supposedly focusing only on her home and hearth, the civil rights movement was in full swing. Pam Brooks argues that by the mid-1950s Black women internationally were engaging in proto-feminist protests, including both the working and middle class, rallying behind 'respectable rebels' such as Rosa Parks.[54] It is unfortunate that second-wave feminism did not connect with this ready-made inclusive legacy.

[52] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, p.102.
[53] *Ibid*., p.101.
[54] Pam Brooks, "'But Once They Are Organised, You Can Never Stop Them': 1950s Black Women in Montgomery and Johannesburg Defy Men and the State," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity,* no.58 (2003): p.85.

While the housewife was constructed as the ideological 'other' of second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism has left room for women returning to the home.[55] Contemporary feminism has more muddied purposes, hinging on discourses of personal choice and how to negotiate the conflicting ideals of work, family and personal development.[56] Recent years have seen the fetishisation of the housewife, as exhibited in the explosion of domestic blogs focused on baking, home decoration and motherhood, often with a self-conscious 1950s aesthetic. Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters discuss how contemporary television shows such as *Mad Men* and *Desperate Housewives,* even while exploring the challenges women face when confined to the home, also illustrate the nostalgia now associated with traditional suburbia by "generating a glossy, fetishistic spectacle out of their groomed appearances, luxurious homes and affluent lifestyles."[57] While 1960s feminism assumed no women actually enjoyed being a housewife, this modern-day idealism pays little attention to the darker side of 1950s domesticity, where strict gender roles were the source of great frustration for many women. Anna Hunt argues that 'the contemporary preoccupation with the domestic […] is not necessarily a lived desire for the reality of domesticity but, rather, an idealisation that relies on its status as fantasy.'[58] Yet this is problematic as it distracts from the fact that women still disproportionately face the burden of housework and child-rearing.[59] Homemaking guides are still overwhelmingly aimed at women and can encourage a sense of inadequacy for those who fail to master 'feminine crafts' on top of their many other obligations. Nevertheless, many women still feel empowered by playing the 1950s 'domestic goddess'

[55] Anna Hunt, "Domestic Dystopias: Big Brother, Wife Swap and How Clean is Your House?," in *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture*, eds. Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), p.125.
[56] Johnson and Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life,* p.17.
[57] Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p.72.
[58] Hunt, "Domestic Dystopias," p.125.
[59] Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Trends in Household Work," 2009, http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features40March%202009

arguing, as one young woman does in *The Guardian,* that "it's got nothing to do with being married, […] it can be seen as quite subversive because you're doing it as a single woman."[60]

The term 'housewife' is a far more complicated historical descriptor than it initially appears. The historical debates surrounding her experience and representation inform contemporary politics relating to the empowerment of women. While there is some truth to the housewife stereotype, popular history has forgotten the nuances of her life. The 'real' 1950s housewife was not simply a return to tradition after the temporary disruption of war; she was a newly constructed entity, informed by historically-specific idealism. The housewife stereotype was solidified by the 1960s women's liberation movement as the free woman's ideological 'other.' Yet this dichotomy has been challenged by contemporary women re-embracing the role of homemaker. Munford and Waters argue that 'the term "housewife" has been transformed into an endlessly mobile descriptor that signifies not one but many potential subject positions.'[61] If the role of the modern day housewife has been released from assumptions of imprisonment, surely the women of the 1950s can also be set free from the additional limitations to their agency, which have been imposed upon them in hindsight.

[60] Viv Groskop, "Do good feminists bake cupcakes?: A new breed of young women is embracing the image of the 1950s housewife, celebrating baking, afternoon tea and knitting. They say their pastime is ironic – even rebellious - but can domesticity really be subversive," *The Guardian*, August 22, 2008. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/22/women

[61] Munford and Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture,* p.72.

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