

Handout 2 - The Decade of The Feminine Mystique

The 1950s are often referred to as a conservative time in American history, especially in relation to representations of family life. Advertising on television, radio and magazines, such as the Tide detergent ad shown here, often depicted adult women as industrious laborers who relished their position as mothers, cooks, and housekeepers. However, research conducted by Betty Friedan beginning in the late 1950s and published in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* revealed that many women felt differently.

Friedan, who held a degree in psychology and a full-time job as a journalist until she was dismissed during her pregnancy in the early 1950s, did extensive interviews with married women as well as conducting a study of representations of women in popular culture. Friedan concluded that most of the popular imagery depicting “happy housewives” was created by men and moreover that, as editors and producers with executive power, these men were creating a “mystique” of the satisfied female homemaker that did not represent the feelings of many women. Rather, Friedan suggested that many women felt suffocated and desired an avenue to establish a personal identity separate from their expected role as support for husbands and children. *The Feminine Mystique* is often cited as opening a new chapter of feminism in the 1960s that featured both formal and informal activism and resulted in changes in the forms of both legislation and social life.



Timeline of Post-Feminine Mystique events in the 1960s:

- June 1963, The Equal Pay Act, aimed at reducing wage inequality between men and women, is signed into law
- The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on gender by private employers, agencies and unions
- In the 1965 case *Griswold v Connecticut* the Supreme Court strikes down a law which prohibits access to contraception for married couples
- 1966, National Organization for Women (NOW) is formed. The group advocates for women’s rights and enforcement of various previously passed legislation such as The Equal Pay and Civil Rights Acts
- 1968, The National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) is founded.
- 1970, California becomes the first state to pass a “No-fault” divorce law, eliminating the need of a spouse to prove “wrongdoing” to dissolve a marriage.