

# Women's Roles in the 1950s

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## Standard Roles, But Changing

Housekeeping and raising a family were considered ideal female roles during the [1950s](#), although that standard was less rigid than in previous decades. With marriage and birthrates booming, women were becoming wives and mothers at unprecedented levels. But more women were entering the work-place as well. During World War II women by the millions took factory jobs to make up for the domestic manpower shortage. After the war the number of working women dropped, but by 1950 it was climbing again, at the rate of a million a year. By 1956, 35 percent of all adult women were members of the labor force, and nearly a quarter of all married women were working. As A. W. Zelomek, president of the International Statistical Bureau, reported in *A Changing America* (1959), two out of five women with husbands and school-age children worked outside the home. However, working women had yet to attain many positions of influence: in 1957 the overwhelming majority, more than 70 percent, held clerical, assembly-line, or service jobs. Only 12 percent practiced a profession, and 6 percent held management positions.

## DIVORCE

As important as home and family were during the 1950s, failed marriages were becoming more prominent. The annual number of marriages actually declined over the course of the decade, as the wave of marriages following World War II began to subside. There were 1.66 million marriages in 1950 and 1.52 million in 1960. At the same time the divorce rate rose slightly, from 385,000 in 1950 to 393,000 in 1960. In 1950, 1 in every 4.3 marriages failed, and by the end of the decade that ratio had changed to 1 in every 3.8. In other words, despite the emphasis on domestic life that characterized the decade, the institution of marriage actually lost ground. One reason for the higher divorce rate was the successful economy, which made it possible for more women to consider leaving their husbands.

## THE TV DINNER

World War II caused TV dinners to be created. With so many men off fighting the war, women entered the workforce in large numbers for the first time to support the war effort. After the war many women kept their jobs. Thus, there was a need for quick, easy meals (which even workingwomen were usually responsible for preparing) for two-worker families at the end of the day.

Clarke and Gilbert Swanson of Omaha saw the need and began selling frozen potpies in 1951 on a national scale. Meanwhile, a lawyer named Cecil Johnson had trademarked the name "TV Dinner." The Swansons acquired Johnson's trademark and began preparing complete dinners in sectional aluminum trays in 1953. The first included one section of turkey with dressing and gravy, another section of flavored sweet potatoes, and a third section of buttered peas. The original packages were designed to show the dinners on a [television](#) screen.

In 1953 five thousand dinners were sent to super-market shelves in the first order. When Campbell Soup bought Swanson in 1955, twenty-five million dinners a year were being sold. These included fish, beef, and chicken varieties. The TV dinner trademark expired in 1973.

Two innovations were necessary to make mass-produced TV dinners a success story. One was the development of the supermarket chain store, which facilitated distribution. The other was the fast freezing techniques developed earlier by Clarence Birdseye that allowed frozen foods to retain their flavor.

**Source:**

Kenneth Morris, Marc Robinson, and Richard Kroll, eds., *American Dreams: One-Hundred Years of Business Ideas and Innovation from the Wall Street Journal* (New York: Light Bulb Press, 1990).



## Rising Opportunities

Many women were torn between traditional expectations and the opportunities available to them. The percentage of women among college students dropped during the decade, to a low of 35 percent in 1958; during the war the majority of collegians had been women, but in the postwar years colleges preferred to accept veterans studying through the GI Bill. A 1959 study determined that 37 percent of female college students were leaving school before they graduated, most for marriage. Even those who stayed in school were not thought to be preparing for a career, the way their male counterparts were. Lynn White, Jr., president of Mills College, proposed in his *Educating Our Daughters* (1950) that the curriculum for female students should prepare women to "foster the intellectual and emotional life of her family and community." Female students taking liberal-arts and professional courses were also encouraged to take classes in interior decoration and family finance. Throughout the decade the male president of all-female Radcliffe College told his incoming freshmen students that their [education](#) would make them "splendid wives and mothers, and their reward might be to marry Harvard men."

## Media Perceptions

The belief in a woman's destined social role was reinforced by the popular media of the day. Since women bought 65 to 80 percent of all goods sold in the United States, advertisements and product designs were frequently aimed at feminine concerns, at least as male [advertising](#) executives saw them. The magazines of

the time were filled with images of dedicated housewives whose only pleasures were that their families were satisfied and their chores made easier. Ironically, as their household responsibilities consumed less of their time, women had more freedom to explore interests other than home and family. While advertisers continued to depict women as domestic servants, real women were finding fulfillment in jobs, volunteer work, and social organizations as well as homemaking.

## Danger to Family

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Women who spent too much time outside the home, social commentators were quick to warn, were endangering their families, neglecting their husbands and especially their children. *Life* magazine, in a special issue devoted to the American woman, deplored the "changing roles" of married couples and placed most of the blame on the increasingly aggressive wife: "They should use [their minds] in every conceivable way ... so long as their primary focus of interest and activity is the home." The article continued: "If they are truly feminine women, with truly feminine attitudes, they will... accept their wifely functions with good humor and pleasure."

## Changing Duties

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Deplorable or not, the pressures of job, home, and family forced both husbands and wives to accept changing domestic duties. With a wife making most of the family's purchases, it made sense that she also controlled the family finances. But if a husband used the car to commute to work, he might buy groceries himself. Frequently, since the wife was at home more than her husband, she would perform much of the manual labor around the house and lawn, traditionally considered "man's work." Fathers might chauffeur the children or represent the couple at school meetings. Children were often obliged to help their busy parents. Experts on family life were not necessarily willing to say that these changes were positive, but American women were grateful for the new opportunities.

## BARBIE

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To the uninitiated, the development of the Barbie doll may not seem like a major technological breakthrough. During her first eight years Barbie brought in \$500 million. This little moneymaker was the product of simple observation by a mother named Ruth Handler.

Ruth Handler and her husband were already accomplished toy designers. Her husband, Elliot, made his fortune in furniture making. Ruth suggested making furniture for dollhouses. This led to Mattel Creations (from the names of the company's two partners, Harold MATson and ELliot Handler, Ruth's husband). After several successful toy inventions, Mattel was growing rapidly. Ruth Handler's observational powers led to the 1959 invention of the Barbie doll and the astounding rise of Mattel in the corporate world.

Ruth Handler was watching her daughter, named Barbara (Barbie), playing with dolls. Barbara had lots of baby dolls to play with. Instead of playing with the baby dolls, though, Barbara would prefer paper dolls of teenagers. These had paper clothing and other articles to accompany them. Ruth Handler had the idea of making a real doll that looked like a teenager. The doll would also have clothes, jewelry, purses, and so forth—" Each sold separately," of course. Furniture for the new doll's house was also available. Ruth Handler had Mattel technicians build the doll to her specifications. Naming it was easy, also. Barbie was named after the Handler's daughter, Barbara. Mattel named the male doll after the Handler's son Ken.

As is often true, ingenuity went unrecognized. The Handlers gave the Barbie doll a debut at a toy show in New York in 1959. The reaction from the others who attended the show was immediate. They told the Handlers that the doll would never sell. Eight years later Ruth Handler had made \$500 million from the sale of Barbie.

It is interesting that Ruth Handler later made another observation that turned tragedy into good fortune. During the 1970s she retired from Mattel after removal of her left breast for cancer. Trying to look and feel like a normal woman, she sought a breast prosthesis. None was adequate. Handler began working with designers and technicians to fill the needs of cancer victims. The result was the Nearly Me products produced by Ruthton, Inc.

## Public Power

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In the realm of public policy women made few significant gains during the decade. Women had secured suffrage only recently, when the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1920. By the 1950s only a few women held national office: out of the 531 members of Congress in 1956, 16 were women. And in the upper house, the Senate, Margaret Chase Smith, a Republican from Maine, was the only female member. Women had made some inroads, however, in diplomatic and cabinet-level positions. Eugenie Anderson, the first woman U.S. ambassador, served as chief diplomat to Denmark from 1949 to 1953. Anna Rosenberg was assistant secretary of defense during the Harry S Truman administration, and President Eisenhower appointed Oveta Culp Hobby, the World War II director of the Women's Army Corps, as his first secretary of health, education, and welfare.

## Sources:

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Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963);

Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

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