

US History

Social & Economic History of the 1950s

Learning Target:

I can identify aspects of 1950s culture that was often hidden from the public, women dissatisfaction and poverty, and examine why.

9. 1950s Illusions: Women and the Poor

The Role of Women –

Motherhood was the expected profession

Reinforced by many sources –

-Media (Magazines, Newspapers, Books, TV)

Dr. Benjamin Spock –

-Baby and Child Care – 1946

-Became bible for new parents

-Urged mothers to think of their children first

-Spock's theories helped reinforce the concept of motherhood as a profession

-Strengthened the old idea that a woman's place was at home

“No job is more exacting, more necessary, or more rewarding than that of a housewife and mother.”

Statistics –

-Indicated American woman agreed with above quote

-Median age for marriage for women 21.5 – 1940, 20.1 – 1956

-By 1950 nearly 60% of all women between 18-24 were married

Mother and Homemaker –

-Women discouraged from attending college in the 1950's

-High school text on family living:

“Men are not interested in college degrees, but in the warmth and humanness of the girls they marry.”

-Women that did go to college usually studied home economics and child development

-One survey of college women indicated most college women believed it is natural for a woman to be satisfied with their husband's success and not crave personal achievement

-Suburban lifestyle strengthened distinctions between male and female roles

-Men left for work early in the morning to commute to jobs in the city – when came home the kids had been fed, bathed, and dressed for bed

-Women assumed responsibility for child rearing, cooking, cleaning, shopping, washing clothes, and participating in school and community activities

Popular Culture and Women –

- Portrayed as cute and perky rather than intelligent and career-minded
- Television sitcoms emphasized women as wives and mother
- Educational system of 50's encouraged girls to follow in footsteps of mothers
- 1962 survey showed 90% of women hoped their daughters would not follow in their footsteps

Women question role in society –

- 1962 survey showed 90% of women hoped their daughters would not follow in their footsteps
- Many women did not feel complete by only being a housewife
- Women who were not satisfied were thought to be mentally disordered, unfeminine, or both

- Betty Friedan – The Feminine Mystique
 - Identified the problem with no name
 - Women asked is this all?

Women in the workforce –

- During 1950's rate of female employment increased 4 times faster than men
- Number of working wives doubled from 1940 to 1960
- By 1960 nearly 40% of women with children between 6 and 17 had jobs outside the house
- Women worked to make money not for career satisfaction
- Faced pressure of American dream and pressure to stay home
- Most jobs low-paying and temporary
- 1955 women earned 55% of men's wages
- Women not allowed a professional career

Hidden Poverty –

- “Invisible Poor” so well hidden that many American’s thought poverty had been eliminated
- 1956 – Historian Arthur Schlesinger –
 - “The central problems of our times are no longer problems of want and privation.”
- 1960 – Fortune Magazine –
 - Stated there are fewer than 1 million poor people left in the US and by 1970 there would be none at all.

Why were the poor invisible –

1. Movement to the suburbs -
 - Middle class moved to the suburbs and left the poor behind after WWII
 - Inner cities became isolated islands of poverty – out of sight, out of mind
 - Manhattan – 1.5 million during day 2,000 at night
 - People of the suburbs did not see the poor of Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens
2. No political voice.
 - in the past European immigrants had been aided by big-city political bosses
 - with this aid the immigrants struggled to a better life
 - urban poor of the 1950’s did not have a political voice
 - felt hopeless
 - 1962 – Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America* – wrote that 50 million Americans lived in poverty defined by not just lack of money but a lack of hope