Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 243-262.

The Cold War and the "Feminine Mystique"

*I*n 1947 when Christian Dior introduced the New Look, American women were horrified. Instead of simple, loose-fitting, square-shouldered attire reminiscent of the war era, he proposed a dramatically new silhouette. Skirts dropped to within inches of the floor; waists were sharply defined and tightly belted beneath well-defined bosoms. Resistance to the new fashion was rather short-lived. Femininity was back—along with foundation garments that could add or subtract where necessary to achieve the prescribed shape.

With the New Look, American women provided a visual symbol of their exit from the male industrial labor market and of the renewed emphasis on polarized images of femininity and masculinity. Lowered skirts hinted at maturity and meshed with the somber mood of the country. The postwar world would not emphasize girlish experimentation as much as the security of family life to which mothers were central. If women continued to work, as many did though no longer in traditionally male jobs, they struggled alone to balance the demands of jobs with family and community life and to conform to cultural images of femininity at the same time. As a postwar recession kept economic fears alive, cold war insecurities grew with every news report. In 1949 the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb, making atomic war a possibility. And China "fell" to a communist revolution. The House Committee on Un-American Activities warned Americans that communists and subversives lurked in the very heartbeats of their communities,

their schools, setting off hysterical witch-hunts among teaching faculty. In 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea and very soon the United States was at war again.

Cold War and Warm Hearths

The red scare accompanying the onset of the cold war powerfully shaped the political mood of the postwar era. The radical effervescence of the thirties gave way to scapegoating and pressures to conform. Unlike the briefer red scare following World War I, however, cold war rhetoric and attacks on "subversives" led by figures like Senator Joe McCarthy had marked sexual overtones. Mixed in with deep cultural anxieties about global politics were fears about the changing place of women and changing sexual norms. The association was not, on the surface, evident, but it can be detected in the rhetoric that conflated these very different anxieties.[1]

The House Un-American Activities Committee published a pamphlet to warn people about the dangers of the communist conspiracy to conquer and rule the world and particularly about the "deadly danger" of communists in the schools. Explaining why school teachers (presumably mostly female) constituted such a dangerous population, the pamphlet quoted John Hanna, a Columbia University professor: "The girls' schools and women's colleges contain some of the most loyal disciples of Russia. Teachers there are often frustrated females. They have gone through bitter struggles to attain their positions. A political dogma based on hatred expresses their personal attitudes." The committee asserted that based on its files, "the Communists have always found the teaching group the easiest touch of all the professional classes."[2]

This scapegoating of women existed in the context of a right-wing resurgence characterized by a politics of victimization and powerlessness. Right-wing organizations such as the newly formed John Birch Society and in the south the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens' Councils preyed on and dramatized widespread anxieties about cultural change. Defensive and parochial, they practiced a politics of division and exclusiveness, attacking anyone outside the norms of white middle-class culture. Nostalgically appealing to an imagined past in which men were men, women were women, and community leaders freely enforced rigid standards of morality,

right-wing demagogues urged a retreat from social or communal problem solving into privatized conformity. It should not be surprising, then, that they linked fears of communists, subversive of the traditional family and, therefore, of the social order.

Cold war rhetoric added a dimension of sexual fear. Anticommunism meshed with homophobia in a campaign to purge public employment and the military of "sexual perverts." Lesbians and rumored lesbians were summarily dismissed from the armed services as "undesirable." Police harassment of gay and lesbian bars became commonplace. And Senator McCarthy demanded that the government seek out and fire all homosexuals. Guy Gabrielson, national chairman of the Republican party, sent an alert to party workers warning that "sexual perverts" who were "perhaps as dangerous as the actual Communists" had "infiltrated our Government in recent years." A subsequent Senate investigation report in December 1950 concluded that "one homosexual can pollute a Government office." Yet "even the most elaborate and costly system of investigating applicants for Government positions will not prevent some sex perverts from finding their way into Government office."[3]

More covert was the generalized fear of sexuality. One Harvard physician's analysis of the consequences of atomic war, published in the *Journal of Social Hygiene*, emphasized social and sexual disorder as a primary concern of public health professionals in the event of an attack. Without "drastic preventive measures" he suggested that venereal disease would increase 1,000 percent and that prostitution, promiscuity, and drunkenness would be rampant.[4] More often than not, the sexuality that was threatening was female, as in the cold war metaphor for sexy women: "bombshells."

At the same time, in their proper place, women symbolized safety and security not only for families but also for the globe. In an article for *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "Women Aren't Men," Agnes E. Meyer put it this way: "Women have many careers but only one vocation—motherhood. . . . It is for woman as mother, actual or vicarious, to restore security in our insecure world."[5] Prescriptions for teenagers betrayed anxieties imbedded in admonition. In "How to Be a Woman," *Seventeen* magazine told the young woman that she was "a partner of man . . . not his rival, his enemy, or his plaything. Your partnership in most cases will produce children, and together you and the man will create a

haven, a home, a way of life for yourselves and the children." The contrast, then, lay between rivalry or enmity, and a family-centered haven. After extolling the "exciting career" of wife and mother, the article concentrated on advice designed to prevent what apparently was the principle obstacle to such a future: pre-marital sex.[6]

Through the fifties, however, anxiety gave way to optimism. The enormous strength of the American economy following the war, boosted by the Korean War and sustained military spending afterward, generated an expanding economy further stimulated by pent-up consumer demand. Visions of material progress born in the late nineteenth century and reshaped in the twenties to emphasize consumption and pleasure reigned triumphant. Burgeoning suburbs absorbed not only middle- and upper-middle-class but also working-class families as rising incomes placed home ownership within reach of nearly 70 percent of Americans.[7] Family formation hit new highs, evidenced statistically in a rising propensity to marry, falling marriage ages, and soaring birthrates.

The dominant optimistic mood (later reflected in nostalgic views of the fifties such as the TV series "Happy Days") turned anxieties on their head, purging complexity and denying change. Capital-ism, pundits declared, works for the benefit of all. Political com-mentator Walter Lippmann noted "We talk about ourselves these days as if we were a completed society." And sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset echoed, "The fundamental problems of the indus-trial revolution have been solved."[8] Faith in technological progress coupled with economic growth led many to predict an end to social divisions such as class and to ideologies based on such divi-sions. Some even predicted that soon there would be no need for welfare. The dominant domestic ideology, known to a later generation as the "feminine mystique," which defined women almost exclusively in terms of wife and mother, functioned smoothly both to shape changes in women's roles and to deny their disruptive power.[9]

The feminine mystique defined women's place in the postwar family-centered, prosperous, middle-class life-style. It wedded pre-war ideas about the centrality of homemaking and motherhood to more popularized versions of Freudian sexuality to produce a sexualized and modernized version of republican motherhood. This version, however, was not very politicized, for politics had retreated either to the simple act of voting or to the activities of

distant governmental experts. Citizens had become "private citi-zens." The duty of the modern mother was to create a warm haven, a happy family life, a goal *McCall's* defined in 1954 as "togetherness." As such, the fifties mother maintained the home as a bulwark of social stability rather than a training ground for future citizens. She also joined in a wide range of community activities as an extension of this domestic vision. Indeed, women's participation in organized activities hardly diminished in the 1950s despite their depoliticization. Church groups, PTAs, the YWCA, branches of the League of Women Voters, and women's clubs of all sorts flourished in cities, towns, and suburbs. In the new suburbs, women assumed the role of community builder as they had done in numerous frontier towns, providing the organizational energy behind new churches, schools, park systems, and libraries that, when institutionalized, rarely placed women in positions of institutional control.

It would require a redefinition of politics and of citizenship to draw women's activities away from the sidelines of political life even though they continued to sustain the grass-roots organiza-tions on which politicians relied. Women occupied less than 5 percent of public offices, even locally. Social scientists advocated a division of labor that reserved for women the "expressive func-tions" of emotion and nurture. Political life was associated with the "instrumental functions" of wage earning and public activity allocated to men. Indeed, in 1952 when the Democratic party abolished its Women's Division, it provided a powerful manifesta-tion of the disassociation of women and private life from politics. The Women's Division had been source of strength and autonomy for Democratic women. Party leaders called their action a "reorgan-ization" that would integrate women's activities into the party structure. India Edwards, Director of the Women's Division, was made a vice-chairman of the Democratic National Party and Direc-tor of Women's Activities, but she no longer had a staff. The same year, the Republican party announced a similar re-structuring.[10] Behind the scenes women continued to work within the political parties through the 1950s, pressing for increased representation, but their efforts remained invisible and only mar-ginally effective.[11]

Lessening anxiety about whether women would stay (and be happy) within their prescribed roles affected material and popular culture as well as expert pronouncements. By 1950 women's fash-

ions retained the longer skirts of the New Look but had shifted to the "baby doll" image with full skirts over layers of crinoline petticoats. Movie stars no longer offered independent and assertive alternatives. Girl-women, they varied from the silly, fluffy characters played by Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds to the sexy but innocent Marilyn Monroe. Coquettish, pleasers of men, they were a far cry from the assertive presence of earlier stars like Katharine Hepburn or Joan Crawford.

The feminine mystique limited male anxieties about changing female sexuality by prescribing the boundaries of change. In the 1950s women could—even should—be sexual (a return to Victorian denial of female sexuality was not possible), but they could not be in control. Freudian popularizers no longer encouraged the independence of the single girl as they had in the twenties. Rather, they redefined sexuality in terms of motherhood. Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg asserted in 1947 that "The woman needs to have in her unconscious mind the knowledge that for her the sex act, to yield maximum satisfaction, terminates only with childbirth or the end of the nursing period."[12]

Thus at the same time that birth control had become standard practice for the majority of the population, experts took great pains to reassert the essential link between female sexuality and reproduction. Similarly, advertisers linked sexual attractiveness with marital prospects: "She's engaged! She's lovely! She uses Pond's!"; "Camay, for skin that says, 'I do!'"[13] The unspoken fear, of course, was that by detaching sexuality from procreation, birth control was likely to facilitate nonmarital sexual encounters, as indeed it did. But popular wisdom calmed such anxieties with ditties and aphorisms that portrayed marriage as the inevitable consequence of love.

Within marriage the experts encouraged a new sexual norm, the simultaneous orgasm. Even though Marie Robinson's best seller, *The Power of Sexual Surrender*, described female orgasm as "a sensation of such beauty and intensity that I can hardly think of it without weeping," she and others used Freudian categories to describe women's sexual experience as essentially passive. Anais Nin wrote in her diary about the two kinds of orgasm—the "immature" clitoral versus the "mature" vaginal orgasm—according to psychoanalysts and novelist D. H. Lawrence: "One [vaginal] in which women lay passive, acquiescent and serene. The one orgasm came out of the darkness miraculously dissolving and invading.

In the other [clitoral] a driving force, an anxiety, a tension . . . confused and unharmonious, cross currents of forces, short circuits which brought an orgasm that did not bring calm satisfaction but depression."[14] By 1959 Marie Robinson could dismiss all women who reached orgasm via the clitoris as frigid. It did not matter that Alfred Kinsey had pointed out in his 1953 study that the vagina had few nerve endings or that the most sexually satisfied group he interviewed were lesbians. The result was that many women struggled with definitions that denied their own physiology.[15]

The Kinsey Report in 1953 demonstrated, however, that behavior was changing quite apart from prescriptions. Approximately one in four college women engaged in premarital intercourse and a strong majority of them expressed no regrets. By quantifying both acceptable and forbidden behaviors as forms of "sexual outlet" Kinsey began a process of demystification. His attack on the idea that homosexuality was pathological provided affirmation for many lesbians and contributed to a long process of attitudinal change.[16]

Architecture gave spatial expression to the intensification of domesticity. Suburbs emphasized the privatization of family life. Pastoral, separated from the conflicted public realms of work and politics, suburban houses no longer segregated formal and informal or male and female spaces as older Victorian homes had done. Rather, in the popular California ranch house the walls of the kitchen became counters and open spaces. Integrating women's primary workspace into other active areas of the household, particularly the increasingly popular family room, home design personified the togetherness of the family unit.

By the later fifties, the tone of celebration in the mass culture presumed that the argument over women's place had been won. In a special issue about American women in 1956, *Look* magazine editors waxed ecstatic about "this wondrous creature" who "marries younger than ever, bears more babies and looks and acts far more feminine than the emancipated girl of the 1920s or even '30's. Steelworker's wife and Junior Leaguer alike do their own housework." Older arguments seemed beside the point as she began to find "a new true center, neither Victorian nor rampantly feminist. Today, if she makes an old-fashioned choice and lovingly tends a garden and a bumper crop of children, she rates louder hosannas than ever before. . . . If, by contrast, she chooses

to take six to ten years out for family, then return to the work for which she was educated, no one fusses much about that either."[17]

Cultural Contradictions

The very economic expansion facilitating this sense of material well-being and self-satisfaction also generated conditions that would undermine it. The revised American dream of a high-consumption-, pleasure- and leisure-oriented society appeared to be possible for most Americans. In their zeal to consume, however, few recognized at first the new problems that would soon overtake them. In a thousand ways, middle-class Americans denied the reality of social changes rapidly eroding old ways. Ideas about domesticity and womanhood were part of this broader pattern.

While the *Saturday Evening Post* portrayed on its covers the dense social relations of small-town America, the most rapid population growth was taking place in a new environment, the suburbs. Women in suburban families, especially housewives with young children, found themselves in a female ghetto as public and private spaces resegregated along geographic lines. Some enjoyed the company and support of other young mothers. Twenty-nine-year-old Eileen Moore described for *Look* the easy visiting patterns and trading of equipment and advice in her Chicago suburb. In addition, she and her husband enjoyed having a neighborhood where everyone was new on the block and close to the same age. That way they avoided the snobbishness and the "get ahead of the Joneses" competition of older suburbs.[18]

Middle-class women often found themselves caught up in a frantic round of volunteer activities and carpooling. Indeed, the station wagon became symbolic of a suburban life-style organized around children's expanding social and cultural opportunities and activities. If her husband were an upwardly mobile corporate executive, she shared his "two-person career" by providing useful social contacts and proper entertaining. *Life* described the "achievements" of one such wife whose husband earned $25,000 a year (nearly four times the median). Marjorie Sutton cooked and sewed clothes for her four children, worked with the Campfire Girls and the PTA, did charity fund-raising, sang in the choir, entertained fifteen hundred guests a year, and exercised on a trampoline "to preserve her size 12 figure."[19]

Most suburban housewives' husbands earned far less than Marjorie Sutton's, however. And these housewives found such demands more difficult to meet. Untold numbers were cut off from extended networks of kin and friends who traditionally had offered support and solace. They were burdened with housework whose standards rose with every new appliance and product and whose performance bore little relation to material rewards. In such circumstances, many experienced isolation and loss of self-esteem. Now that most houses had electric washing machines, standards of cleanliness and quantities of clothing escalated. Advertisers offered a variety of products guaranteed to get laundry "whiter than white" and showed women eyeing one another's clotheslines competitively over back fences. Ad agencies quickly realized that guilt and feelings of inadequacy were easily manipulable. Cake mix manufacturers found that their product gained popularity after they removed the eggs from the mix. Women felt too guilty to serve cakes that required only the addition of water. Once they could add their own fresh eggs and associated warm cakes with family love rather than time off, women began to use cake mixes in great quantities.

The problem remained that no one was sure that housework was really "work" in a culture and an economy which consistently measured value with dollar bills. By the late fifties the pressures of consumption-oriented domesticity allowed advertisers to shift their appeals back to time saving, especially when the drudgery of housework could be replaced with emotion-centered family activities: "Clean and shine pots and pans faster, have more time for *family fun*, spend less time in the kitchen." In another ad, a mother in her scout leader's uniform closed the door of her Kitchenaid dishwasher as father and Cub Scout son waited at the door. "More time for living" read the text.[20]

Such domestic scenes were uniformly white and middle class, for suburbs had also effected a new racial and economic segregation of American society. The rural poor, many of them black, moved to the cities as more affluent whites moved to the suburbs. There blacks joined communities of ethnic blue-collar workers who could not afford or did not want the novelty and the uniformity of suburbia. Growing numbers of female-headed households among the urban poor—at a time when social scientists such as Seymour Martin Lipset glibly declared that "the fundamental problems of the industrial revolution have been solved"—evoked moral condemnation rather than social concern.[21] Female single

parents, especially the never-married, had no place in a world that saw itself through the television lens of "I Love Lucy," "Father Knows Best," and "Leave It to Beaver," nor did the poor, racial minorities, or working-class ethnics, whose relative invisibility allowed them to be dismissed and ignored by the popular culture.

As the geography of urban spaces divided along class, race, and gender lines, the mass media provoked further cultural fragmentation. Television entered 5 million new homes per year with a powerful capacity to generate cultural norms and present a homogenized image of middle America that blurred differences of ethnicity and class. Differences along the lines of gender were perhaps the most powerful social division recognized and enforced in this portrayal of American life as relentlessly white and middle class. Daytime television replaced the old radio soap opera programming aimed at women, providing ongoing socialization into the mysteries of domesticity. At the same time, popular music and the medium of radio shifted toward more specialized audiences along lines of race, class, and age as well. Urban black culture offered an audience for commercial music rooted in jazz, gospel, and rhythm and blues. Simultaneously white youth forsook their parents' musical tastes with the birth of rock and roll that borrowed heavily from rhythm and blues. The shocking and sensuous pulsations of rock and roll (represented most powerfully by Elvis Presley) marked a new stage in the evolution of youth culture and the emergence of sexuality into commercial mass culture.

Popular culture based in a consumer economy depended ironically on the massive growth of the female labor force that allowed millions of families to enter the amorphous "middle class." Women provided the most important source of new workers throughout the fifties, providing half the total growth in the labor force. In contradiction to privatized images of family life and the glorification of motherhood, white married women with children entered the labor force at an accelerating rate. From 1950 to 1960 their labor force participation rate grew from 17 to 30 percent.[22]

Economists explain such shifts with reference to supply and demand. In fact, there were powerful forces at work creating jobs for women (demand) and women who wanted jobs (supply). On the demand side, the reestablishment of labor force segregation following World War II ironically reserved for women a large proportion of the new jobs created in the fifties due to the fact that the fastest growing sector of the economy was no longer

industry but services. The service sector, in turn, generated jobs already established as appropriate for women. Clerical work; lower-level jobs in education, health care, and social services; waitress and housekeeper jobs in hotels; airline stewardesses; and sales clerks all had become associated with women's traditional serving and nurturing responsibilities in the home.[23]

Clerical workers increased their predominance among working women with the growth of huge corporate and government bureaucracies. Education expanded so rapidly in response to the baby boom and urban growth that retaining prejudices against married women teachers proved impractical. Nurses found new opportunities as well as new problems in an expanding health industry. Hospitals replaced private duty as the locus of most nurses' employment. Placed under the direct supervision of physicians and hospital administrators, many nurses felt robbed of autonomy and artisanal pride, but hospital employment was more secure and jobs were plentiful. New divisions of labor resulted in paraprofessions for nurses aides and Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs). Within hospitals nurses began to develop specialized expertise associated with cardiac, obstetric, and intensive care wards. Female nurses also discovered new bonds of solidarity with other nurses while working together as a team on hospital wards, and they initiated informal methods of resisting doctors' authority.[24]

As jobs opened for women workers, there was no apparent hesitation as the women, most of them married, seized these opportunities. Long-term factors had shaped the increasing availability of married women through the twentieth century. Women lived longer and had fewer children—despite the baby boom, the long-term trends remained clear. They also married younger and concentrated their childbearing in the early years of marriage. Together, these changes resulted in a new post–child-rearing life stage, relatively free of child care responsibilities. Most women lived in urban areas, the location of most new jobs. Increased educational opportunities and a rising propensity to marry had sharply reduced the supply of single working girls. Young women were likely to move straight from school to marriage expecting to work until they had children and possibly again when the children were older.[25]

Such expectations reflected a shift in values under way since the 1930s and accelerating in the 1940s. Educated, middle-class married women were taking the path pioneered by their black

and working-class counterparts, combining work inside and outside the family home. Highly educated married women began to demonstrate a greater tendency to work outside the home in the 1940s, in part because many of the new jobs required significant literacy skills and special training. Then in the 1950s the link between husbands' income and female labor force participation began to change. In 1950 the less a man earned, the more likely his wife would be employed. Through the 1950s and 1960s, however, this pattern gradually changed until by 1968 the wives most likely to work were married to middle-income men.[26] Indeed, married women in middle-income families entered the labor force faster than any other group in the population through the 1950s and 1960s. Although women in very low-income families continued to work outside the home in disproportionate numbers, it appears that many working-class families, capable of living on a single wage for the first time, chose to live out the values of domesticity glamorized by the popular media.[27]

The powerful forces of supply and demand meshed with the values of booming consumer capitalism to generate an ideological shift that justified women's new roles. The definition of what was essential had expanded to include home ownership, automobiles, refrigerators and other appliances, televisions, and college educations for children. Thus many families felt the urgent need for a second income for only with that could they enter the "middle class." As long as this second income was defined as secondary and dispensable (regardless of the actuality) it could be acceptably earned by a woman (wife). If women worked to "help out" the family, they were no longer violating social convention. As *Look* put it in 1956: "No longer a psychological immigrant to man's world, she works rather casually, as a third of the U.S. labor force, and less toward a big career than as a way of filling a hope chest or buying a new home freezer. She gracefully concedes the top job rungs to men."[28] Similarly, after reveling in the "achievements" of a housewife, the beauty of young women, and the delights of motherhood, *Life*'s 1956 special issue on women offered a picture essay on working women which visually emphasized numbers, sameness, and passivity. Nurses and teachers, for example, could easily have been depicted on the job, exercising authority and creativity. Instead, they appeared as large audiences, listening impassively to lectures from male experts. Similarly, in a typing pool 450 women were shown pounding away on identical

machines. A line of chorus girls presented the only active image of working women.[29]

If popular culture accepted women's work outside the home, then, it did so in a way that validated a segmented labor force. It also denied the economic or psychological importance of jobs for the women who held them and masked the continuing realities of discrimination and denial of opportunity. Professional, clerical, and blue-collar women chafed at this reality, but there were few environments in which they could move beyond individual grievance or find a shared language with which to challenge cultural assumptions.

Female Organizations: Fragmented Publics

Indeed, as the public economy assumed many serving and nurturing tasks in health, education, and personal services traditionally associated with women, and as large numbers of women worked outside their homes, traditional boundaries between public and private spaces no longer made much sense. This erosion of the boundaries, however, did not allow the feminine mystique to become an ideological base for female self-assertion in the way that its nineteenth-century predecessor, the cult of true womanhood, had done. There was no strong sense of public or civic life where women could put into practice the values of domesticity, nor were those values easily expressed in communal terms. Thus Adlai Stevenson's exhortations to women to take up the banner of republican motherhood in a commencement address at Smith College in 1955, only reemphasized the isolation of the housewife. He began with a recognition that women "feel frustrated and far apart from the great issues and stirring debate for which their education has given them understanding and relish. Once they wrote poetry. Now it's the laundry list." Nevertheless, Stevenson urged that a woman could perform her political duty by inspiring "in her home a vision of the meaning of life and freedom . . . help[ing] her husband find values that will give purpose to his specialized daily chores . . . [and] teach[ing] her children the uniqueness of each individual human being."[30]

The fact was that even middle-class women no longer shared a sense of female "mission." The aging remnant of the National Woman's Party illustrated the irrelevance of its tradition. Sharing a powerful sense of sisterhood rooted in early-twentieth century

images, they sustained a tight network providing ongoing support for members. Their daily lives and their work wove together in a seamless web of community that allowed them to buck the tide of the mid-twentieth century and to lobby relentlessly for the Equal Rights Amendment guaranteeing women legal equality under the Constitution. Their perspectives, however, were shared by few others and their community was not a free space within which younger women, raised in a different time, could build from their own inheritance to a new sense of possibility. A close-knit and self-enclosed group, they had neither the language nor the method to reach out.[31]

Yet the blandness of the fifties' domestic ideology and cold war conformity masked new signs of discontent and change. Although most women experienced problems as individuals, collective activity within a wide variety of groups in the population signaled possibilities which would surface in subsequent decades. Working-class women, for example, experienced continuing discrimination based on traditional stereotypes. Union leaders, uniformly male, generally shared traditional attitudes toward women and were only gradually pushed to work against gender discrimination. Their hostility to the ERA and defense of legislation protecting women workers led to a public posture that emphasized female weakness and difference. The demise of a broad female reform coalition which had undergirded Progressivism and laid the groundwork for the New Deal had severed the links between working- and middle-class reform-minded women. Working-class women had few environments in which they could define their own problems or work for change. Two exceptions to these patterns are notable because they illustrate the conditions necessary both for women to develop a shared agenda and to push effectively for change. In the very different circumstances of New Mexico's salt mines and the United Auto Workers' Women's Bureau, women did just that.

In 1950 Chicano miners in New Mexico went out on strike protesting unsafe conditions and wage cuts at the Empire Zinc Company. In their isolated mining village, the employers owned everything including the workers' houses. Women, who were the backbone of the village community, had long complained about the poor conditions of company shacks lacking such basics as hot running water. They knew very well the importance of the strike for the safety of their husbands and brothers and for their

own livelihoods because there were no opportunities for women to earn money. They also understood the terrible consequences of a prolonged or lost strike. Their own dependence led many to respond reluctantly at first to the strike announcement.

As the community mobilized, however, the women began to ask why family needs for decent housing were not included in the strike demands. The men laughed. How ridiculous. Didn't they understand what was really important here? The tables turned, however, when an injunction forbade miners from picketing and the company trucked in strikebreakers to take their places. Women, whose leadership skills had been honed invisibly in churches and on front porches, stepped forward and took over the picket line. Suddenly, men found themselves home, feeding children, changing diapers, and washing clothes (without hot water) while their women faced the police. Men were not on strike any more. The community was. Women, empowered by their experiences, found a unique free space on the picket lines and in the packed jail cells. The jailer hardly knew what to do with cells full of singing women and crying babies. When a young woman complained that her baby needed formula, not milk, the women chanted "We want the formula" until the walls rang. Cowed, the jailer agreed to go and get it. With a new sense of their own rights, women returned home to face men who also understood in a new way the legitimacy of their demands. Their story was immortalized just a few years later in the film Salt of the Earth, in which many villagers played themselves. The film was suppressed, however, as part of a Hollywood purge of suspected "subversives."[32]

In a very different way the female staff of the United Auto Workers' Women's Bureau developed an agenda for change through the fifties. Because of their institutional position, they received complaints and appeals from women throughout the international union, and they began to see broad patterns which challenged union orthodoxy. In particular, they became aware of the ways in which protective laws were used to discriminate against women. Unrealistic restrictions on hours or weight-lifting kept women out of higher paying jobs and limited their promotions. For example, simply by adding a single instance of lifting over the prescribed weight limit a company could change a job from "female" to "male."

The record of the UAW in the 1950s was a limited one, however.

she knew that the leadership was looking for "a man and a minister" to serve as director.[38]

The context for this new movement in the south was rising expectations and rising repression following the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* that outlawed school segregation. White southerners in the mid-1950s had mounted a massive campaign of rioting, violence such as the Emmett Till case, and school closings to resist integration. In community after community, black women were among the key figures who refused to give in to violent threats and intimidation. In 1956 Authurine Lucy faced Governor George Wallace as he sought to bar her entrance as the first black student at the University of Alabama. She knew that federal officials would force him to step aside but she was also aware that a riotous mob had gathered and violence was imminent.

In 1957 Daisy Bates, president of the Little Rock, Arkansas, NAACP, won a suit to require the integration of Little Rock High School. When Governor Orville Faubus called out the National Guard to prevent the entry of nine black students, President Dwight Eisenhower responded by sending federal troops to protect them. In her autobiography Bates described the courage of children such as fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford and sixteen-year-old Minnijean Brown who faced down mobs, returning to school day after day despite constant harassment and violence from white students and their parents.[39]

Growing racial violence signaled the fact that behind the ideological blinders of the feminine mystique, togetherness, and social harmony, the 1950s were rife with conflict over the meaning and structure of American society. The educated middle class worked to fulfill a vision of domestic bliss in the expanding suburbs while urban blacks began to make their own claims on an American dream they had been denied. The popular fifties female image glorified domesticity at the same time that women entered the labor force more rapidly than ever before. Pundits declared the end of class divisions and of ideologies based on them as the poor concentrated in urban ghettos and popular entertainment fragmented along lines of race and class. Upper-middle-class men in gray flannel suits yearned for proof of their manliness in faceless bureaucracies as they were revered as breadwinners at home. Do-

mesticated wives could soothe men's bruised egos. As a 1955 "Harvard man" put it: "She can be independent on little things, but the big decisions will have to go my way. The marriage must be the most important thing that ever happened to her."[40] Yet in spite of these hopes and domestic expectations (shared by many women as well), women with college educations were more likely to work outside the home than those without. As the consumerist ethos and high mobility seriously eroded traditional communal bonds, not only were housewives increasingly isolated, but also some of their middle-class men began to resist domesticity that made too many claims on them as providers. They preferred consumerism not tied to families, an ethic of pleasure without responsibility articulated by editor Hugh Hefner as the "*Playboy* philosophy."[41]

Traditional women's service organizations with their roots in nineteenth-century female culture could not provide a base from which to challenge the complexities of women's place in mid-twentieth-century America. Nevertheless, they continued to provide a training ground for leadership and to lay the groundwork for future change. The 1950s marked a resurgence of religious observance, often derided for its status orientation and theological emptiness. Yet student groups sponsored by the YWCA and other mainline religious organizations held intense discussions of the relationship between Judeo-Christian values and the social order. They challenged racial segregation and noticed the ferment of anticolonial independence movements in Asia and Africa. While youthful beatniks in Greenwich Village proclaimed their hostility to a hypocritical, consumerist society, other young people began to organize a movement to stop the testing of nuclear weapons.

The signs of ferment on campuses reflected in part the dramatic expansion of higher education in the postwar era that had an additional consequence of enlarging the number of professional women by 41 percent between 1940 and 1960. Professional women were, perhaps, the most natural audience for the feminist message of the National Woman's Party. Their position was an extremely precarious one because despite their growing numbers, the proportion of women in most professions continued to decline and they remained limited primarily to female-dominated fields such as teaching and nursing. Extensive training and commitment to their work made them the dreaded career women described in the tradition of Farnham and Lundberg as the "fatal error" of

With some success the Women's Bureau opposed discrimination against married women, but attempts to eliminate separate seniority lists and job classifications based on sex won little favor. Because the Women's Bureau worked to increase women's participation in ways encouraging loyalty to the union local without facilitating women's own solidarity, the national office's growing awareness of pervasive discrimination and unequal pay was not widely shared. Nevertheless, the UAW Women's Bureau provided a key environment in which the realities of work for women in industry could become visible, the need for change articulated, and future leadership trained. No other union provided such a space.[33]

Tiny seeds of self-organization sprouted among lesbians in the 1950s as well. The heterosexual and family preoccupations of postwar culture had reemphasized the deviance of lesbians leaving them simultaneously more self-conscious and more vulnerable. On September 21, 1955, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, a lesbian couple living in San Francisco, held the founding meeting of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), named for a poet who was supposed to have lived on the Greek island of Lesbos in the time of the lesbian poet Sappho. Dissatisfied with bar culture and with relationships they believed mimicked male/female roles, DOB founders sought to create "a home for the Lesbian. She can come here to find help, friendship, acceptance and support. She can help others understand themselves, and can go out into the world to help the public understand her better."[34]

The DOB participated with other homosexual organizations in a movement to change public attitudes and advocate homosexual rights. Always aware of the specific needs of lesbians, many of whom were mothers or trapped in heterosexual marriages, they refused to become subordinated to male-dominated organizations. The constituency of DOB remained small, primarily professional women who could afford the risks and who disliked the working-class ambience of bars. Most lesbians remained isolated and socially marginal, but their invisibility to the culture and to themselves was beginning to fade.[35]

Black women also began to take on more visible roles working for change. Those who had tasted equality during the war were reluctant to return to the wages and demeaning personal relations of domestic work. With their families they moved in massive numbers into cities, sharing the rising expectations generated by the expanding economy and increasingly looking for their rights as

citizens and Americans. More than any other wives, married black women worked outside the home. They had built a collective tradition of activism within the black church, and as school teachers they instilled a new generation of black children in the urban south with racial pride that could withstand the daily humiliations of segregation. Again and again in the stories of rising racial protest through the fifties, women appear in key roles.[36]

The moment many see as the birth of the civil rights movement came in the fall of 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. Rosa Parks, a seamstress, churchgoer, secretary of the local NAACP, and beloved community member, boarded the city bus feeling bone-weary. The "colored" section at the back was full, so she sat at the rear of the "white" section. When the rest of the bus filled, the driver angrily demanded that she give up her seat. Rosa Parks refused. Soon the black community buzzed with news of her arrest. Joanne Robinson of the Local Women's Political Council, a black counterpart to the white League of Women Voters, immediately put into action the bus boycott she and her organization had discussed for more than a year. In the middle of the night she and two students duplicated thousands of boycott notices at Alabama State College, where she was an English professor. Soon, everyone in the black community knew. With the support of other black leaders such as E. D. Nixon, head of the state NAACP and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and black churches under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., the boycott lasted for more than a year. Blacks in Montgomery walked, carpooled, and built an unshakable sense of community solidarity and pride. As one elderly black woman put it, when offered a ride by a white reporter: "No, my feets is tired but my soul is rested."[37]

Long before the bus boycott Ella Baker had worked with Parks organizing NAACP chapters in Alabama. When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), headed by Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged out of the boycott Baker went to Atlanta to set up an office and coordinate the first southwide project. She understood the voter registration project called "Crusade for Citizenship" as a process of movement building. "The word Crusade connotes for me a vigorous movement with high purpose and involving masses of people. . . . It must provide for a sense of achievement and recognition for many people, particularly local leadership." Baker stayed on to run the SCLC office for two and a half years when there were virtually no resources, though

feminism. A few pioneers, like a woman physicist, could be portrayed as exceptions, proof that the unusual woman could do anything she wished. But suspicions that such women might abandon their "natural" roles brought ritualistic affirmations of the primacy of marriage and family in professional women's lives. A study of female executives in 1956 indicated that all the women interviewed valued home and family above their jobs but believed they could satisfy the demands of each "if they want to badly enough."[42] Such articles rarely explored the ways discrimination limited women's horizons. Discontent was rising, but voices of protest remained fragmented, isolated, and defensive.

The weakness of women's protests in the fifties illustrates the power of domesticity to define the parameters of change. Domestic ideology redefined a new reality—female labor force participation—to remove the potential threat of female power and autonomy by making women's work legitimate only as an extension of traditional family responsibilities. Locked into jobs defined as female, they could be paid less, denied opportunities for training and promotion, and laid off easily. Yet, the problems women faced were deep, structural, and increasingly urgent. Fewer and fewer lived the prescribed domestic and highly privatized life. Professional and blue-collar women alike increasingly chafed at the discrimination and lack of respect they experienced in the world of work. Younger women grew up with mixed, contradictory messages. The cultural ideal informed them that their only true vocation lay in marriage and motherhood. But they observed their mothers' realities, which were substantially different. And, black women had begun a process of protest that would soon shatter illusions of stability and challenge American society to live up to some of its most deeply held values. All of these groups were about to move into action far more dramatic than they knew at the time.