The Feminine Mystique: Chapter 1

"The Problem that Has No Name"

Betty Friedan

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night--she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--"Is this all?"

For over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire--no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity…They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They 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…

By the end of the nineteen-fifties, the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping, into the teens. Fourteen million girls were engaged by 17. The proportion of women attending college in comparison with men dropped from 47 per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 1958. A century earlier, women had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a husband. By the mid-fifties, 60 per cent dropped out of college to marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar. Colleges built dormitories for "married students," but the students were almost always the husbands. A new degree was instituted for the wives--"Ph.T." (Putting Husband Through).

Then American girls began getting married in high school. And the women's magazines, deplored the unhappy statistics about these young marriages, urged that courses on marriage, and marriage counselors, be installed in the high schools. Girls started going steady at twelve and thirteen, in junior high. Manufacturers put out brassieres with false bosoms of foam rubber for little girls of ten. And on advertisement for a child's dress, sizes 3-6x, in the New York Times in the fall of 1960, said: "She Too Can Join the Man-Trap Set."…

In a New York hospital, a woman had a nervous breakdown when she found she could not breastfeed her baby. In other hospitals, women dying of cancer refused a drug which research had proved might save their lives: its side effects were said to be unfeminine. "If I have only one life, let me live it as a blonde," a larger-than-life- sized picture of a pretty, vacuous woman proclaimed from newspaper, magazine, and drugstore ads. And across America, three out of every ten women dyed their hair blonde. They ate a chalk called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink to the size of the thin young models.
Department-store buyers reported that American women, since 1939, had become three and four sizes smaller. "Women are out to fit the clothes, instead of vice-versa," one buyer said.

Interior decorators were designing kitchens with mosaic murals and original paintings, for kitchens were once again the center of women's lives. Home sewing became a million-dollar industry. Many women no longer left their homes, except to shop, chauffeur their children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands. Girls were growing up in America without ever having jobs outside the home. In the late fifties, a sociological phenomenon was suddenly remarked: a third of American women now worked, but most were no longer young and very few were pursuing careers. They were married women who held part-time jobs, selling or secretarial, to put their husbands through school, their sons through college, or to help pay the mortgage. Or they were widows supporting families. Fewer and fewer women were entering professional work. The shortages in the nursing, social work, and teaching professions caused crises in almost every American city. Concerned over the Soviet Union's lead in the space race, scientists noted that America's greatest source of unused brain-power was women. But girls would not study physics: it was "unfeminine…"

The suburban housewife--she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife--freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of.

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture…

For over fifteen years, the words written for women, and the words women used when they talked to each other, while their husbands sat on the other side of the room and talked shop or politics or septic tanks, were about problems with their children, or how to keep their husbands happy, or improve their children's school, or cook chicken or make slipcovers. Nobody argued whether women were inferior or superior to men; they were simply different. Words like "emancipation" and "career" sounded strange and embarrassing; no one had used them for years. When a Frenchwoman named Simone de Beauvoir wrote a book called The Second Sex, an American critic commented that she obviously "didn't know what life was all about," and besides, she was talking about French women. The "woman problem" in America no longer existed.

If a woman had a problem in the 1950's and 1960's, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it. If she tried to tell her husband, he didn't understand what she was talking about. She did not really understand it herself.

For over fifteen years women in America found it harder to talk about the problem than about sex. Even the psychoanalysts had no name for it. When a woman went to a psychiatrist for help, as many women did, she would say, "I'm so ashamed," or "I must be hopelessly neurotic." "I don't know what's wrong with women today," a suburban psychiatrist said uneasily. "I only know something is wrong because
most of my patients happen to be women. And their problem isn't sexual." Most women with this
problem did not go to see a psychoanalyst, however. "There's nothing wrong really," they kept telling
themselves, "There isn't any problem."

But on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a
suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, "the problem."
And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her
children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no
name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it. Later, after they had picked up their children at nursery
school and taken them home to nap, two of the women cried, in sheer relief, just to know they were not
alone…

Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to
express it? Sometimes a woman would say "I feel empty somehow . . . incomplete." Or she would say,
"I feel as if I don't exist." Sometimes she blotted out the feeling with a tranquilizer. Sometimes she
thought the problem was with her husband or her children, or that what she really needed was to
redecorate her house, or move to a better neighborhood, or have an affair, or another baby. Sometimes,
she went to a doctor with symptoms she could hardly describe: "A tired feeling. . . I get so angry with
the children it scares me . . . I feel like crying without any reason." (A Cleveland doctor called it "the
housewife's syndrome.") A number of women told me about great bleeding blisters that break out on
their hands and arms. "I call it the housewife's blister" said a family doctor in Pennsylvania. "I see it so
often lately in these young women with four, five and six children who bury themselves in their
dishpans. But it isn't caused by detergent and it isn't cured by cortisone…"

A mother of four who left college at nineteen to get married told me:

I've tried everything women are supposed to do--hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning,
being very social with my neighbors, joining committees, running PTA teas. I can do it
all, and I like it, but it doesn't leave you anything to think about--any feeling of who you
are. I never had any career ambitions. All I wanted was to get married and have four
children. I love the kids and Bob and my home. There's no problem you can even put a
name to. But I'm desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I'm a server of food and
putter-on of pants and a bed maker, somebody who can be called on when you want
something. But who am I?

A twenty-three-year-old mother in blue jeans said:

I ask myself why I'm so dissatisfied. I've got my health, fine children, a lovely new home,

enough money. My husband has a real future as an electronics engineer. He doesn't have

any of these feelings. He says maybe I need a vacation, let's go to New York for a

weekend. But that isn't it. I always had this idea we should do everything together. I can't

sit down and read a book alone. If the children are napping and I have one hour to myself

I just walk through the house waiting for them to wake up. I don't make a move until I

know where the rest of the crowd is going. It's as if ever since you were a little girl,

there's always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents,
or college, or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake

up one morning and there's nothing to look forward to.

A young wife in a Long Island development said:
Feminist Movement Lesson Plan by Kevin Murphy

I seem to sleep so much. I don't know why I should be so tired. This house isn't nearly so hard to clean as the cold-water Hat we had when I was working. The children are at school all day. It's not the work. I just don't feel alive…

In 1960, the problem that has no name burst like a boil through the image of the happy American housewife. In the television commercials the pretty housewives still beamed over their foaming dishpans and Time's cover story on "The Suburban Wife, an American Phenomenon" protested: "Having too good a time . . . to believe that they should be unhappy." But the actual unhappiness of the American housewife was suddenly being reported--from the New York Times and Newsweek to Good Housekeeping and CBS Television ("The Trapped Housewife"), although almost everybody who talked about it found some superficial reason to dismiss it…Some said it was the old problem--education: more and more women had education, which naturally made them unhappy in their role as housewives. "The road from Freud to Frigidaire, from Sophocles to Spock, has turned out to be a bumpy one," reported the New York Times (June 28,1960)…

Can the problem that has no name be somehow related to the domestic routine of the housewife? When a woman tries to put the problem into words, she often merely describes the daily life she leads. What is there in this recital of comfortable domestic detail that could possibly cause such a feeling of desperation? Is she trapped simply by the enormous demands of her role as modern housewife: wife, mistress, mother, nurse, consumer, cook, chauffeur, expert on interior decoration child care, appliance repair, furniture refinishing, nutrition, and education?… She has no time to read books, only magazines; even if she had time, she has lost the power to concentrate. At the end of the day, she is so terribly tired that sometimes her husband has to take over and put the children to bed.

This terrible tiredness took so many women to doctors in the 1950's that one decided to investigate it. He found, surprisingly, that his patients suffering from 'housewife's fatigue' slept more than an adult needed to sleep -as much as ten hours a day- and that the actual energy they expended on housework did not tax their capacity. The real problem must be something else, he decided-perhaps boredom. Some doctors told their women patients they must get out of the house for a day, treat themselves to a movie in town. Others prescribed tranquilizers. Many suburban housewives were taking tranquilizers like cough drops…

It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off.

How can any woman see the whole truth within the bounds of her own life? How can she believe that voice inside herself, when it denies the conventional, accepted truths by which she has been living? And yet the women I have talked to, who are finally listening to that inner voice, seem in some incredible way to be groping through to a truth that has defied the experts…

I began to see in a strange new light the American return to early marriage and the large families that are causing the population explosion; the recent movement to natural childbirth and breastfeeding; suburban conformity, and the new neuroses, character pathologies and sexual problems being reported by the doctors. I began to see new dimensions to old problems that have long been taken for granted among women: menstrual difficulties, sexual frigidity, promiscuity, pregnancy fears, childbirth depression, the high incidence of emotional breakdown and suicide among women in their twenties and thirties, the menopause crises, the so-called passivity and immaturity of American men, the discrepancy between
women's tested intellectual abilities in childhood and their adult achievement, the changing incidence of
adult sexual orgasm in American women, and persistent problems in psychotherapy and in women's
education.

If I am right, the problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is
not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more
important than anyone recognizes. It is the key to these other new and old problems which have been
torturing women and their husbands and children, and puzzling their doctors and educators for years. It
may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within
women that says: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home."