

# **The Feminine Mystique: Chapter 1**

## **"The Problem that Has No Name"**

**Betty Friedan**

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

12 For over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women,  
13 for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek  
14 fulfillment as wives and mothers. Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian  
15 sophistication that they could desire--no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity... They  
16 were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or  
17 presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political  
18 rights--the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for...

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

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

33 In a New York hospital, a woman had a nervous breakdown when she found she could not breastfeed  
34 her baby. In other hospitals, women dying of cancer refused a drug which research had proved might  
35 save their lives: its side effects were said to be unfeminine. "If I have only one life, let me live it as a  
36 blonde," a larger-than-life- sized picture of a pretty, vacuous woman proclaimed from newspaper,  
37 magazine, and drugstore ads. And across America, three out of every ten women dyed their hair blonde.  
38 They ate a chalk called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink to the size of the thin young models.

39 Department-store buyers reported that American women, since 1939, had become three and four sizes  
40 smaller. "Women are out to fit the clothes, instead of vice-versa," one buyer said.

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

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

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

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

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

78 For over fifteen years women in America found it harder to talk about the problem than about sex. Even  
79 the psychoanalysts had no name for it. When a woman went to a psychiatrist for help, as many women  
80 did, she would say, "I'm so ashamed," or "I must be hopelessly neurotic." "I don't know what's wrong  
81 with women today," a suburban psychiatrist said uneasily. "I only know something is wrong because

82 most of my patients happen to be women. And their problem isn't sexual." Most women with this  
83 problem did not go to see a psychoanalyst, however. "There's nothing wrong really," they kept telling  
84 themselves, "There isn't any problem."

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

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

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

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

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

113 I ask myself why I'm so dissatisfied. I've got my health, fine children, a lovely new home,  
114 enough money. My husband has a real future as an electronics engineer. He doesn't have  
115 any of these feelings. He says maybe I need a vacation, let's go to New York for a  
116 weekend. But that isn't it. I always had this idea we should do everything together. I can't  
117 sit down and read a book alone. If the children are napping and I have one hour to myself  
118 I just walk through the house waiting for them to wake up. I don't make a move until I  
119 know where the rest of the crowd is going. It's as if ever since you were a little girl,  
120 there's always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents,  
121 or college, or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake  
122 up one morning and there's nothing to look forward to.

123 A young wife in a Long Island development said:

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

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

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

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

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

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

160 I began to see in a strange new light the American return to early marriage and the large families that are  
161 causing the population explosion; the recent movement to natural childbirth and breastfeeding; suburban  
162 conformity, and the new neuroses, character pathologies and sexual problems being reported by the  
163 doctors. I began to see new dimensions to old problems that have long been taken for granted among  
164 women: menstrual difficulties, sexual frigidity, promiscuity, pregnancy fears, childbirth depression, the  
165 high incidence of emotional breakdown and suicide among women in their twenties and thirties, the  
166 menopause crises, the so-called passivity and immaturity of American men, the discrepancy between

167 women's tested intellectual abilities in childhood and their adult achievement, the changing incidence of  
168 adult sexual orgasm in American women, and persistent problems in psychotherapy and in women's  
169 education.

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