

Women and Work

(from the *American Experience* film "Tupperware" website at PBS.org:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/tupperware/sfeature/sf_women.html

In this interview, University of Minnesota historian Elaine Tyler May discusses women and work in the postwar era. Professor May has written social histories including *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) and *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).



TOM FOLEY

How did World War II change women's employment possibilities?

World War II opened up tremendous opportunities for women because so many men joined the armed services and went abroad, leaving open many jobs that had been previously closed to women. It had been long assumed women couldn't do those jobs -- engineering, other professions in the sciences, manufacturing jobs that had been considered men's work, things women were believed to be too weak to do.

Women entered these jobs, excelled, and enjoyed them for the most part. Women made airplanes and warships, munitions and tanks, working in technical and scientific fields for the first time. They enjoyed the work, the good pay, the opportunities for advancement, and the excitement of working with other women and men on important jobs that needed to be done for the war.

Most wanted to continue working after the war ended. But, of course, millions of men came back from serving in the military and there was a widespread fear that there would be another depression once the wartime economy shut down. Women were asked to do their part by leaving the job market. Many were fired from their jobs so the returning veterans could be re-employed.

After the war, women were still employed as secretaries, waitresses, or in other clerical jobs, what we often call the "pink collar" work force. Those jobs were not as well paid, and they were not as enjoyable or challenging, but women did take those jobs because they either wanted or needed to keep working.

What drove the postwar baby boom?

The baby boom happened as a result of many factors, including important demographic ones. A lot of women got married and had children after the war, and they generally stopped working after that. The marriage age dropped dramatically -- young people were rushing into marriage, and a larger percentage of people married than ever before. People began having children at a younger age. Nearly everybody got married and had children. It wasn't that people started having large families... it was that everybody was having a few children, at all levels of society.

Another factor was that prosperity was available after the war. People were no longer afraid to commit to having children, because they could use the savings that had been pent up during the war. There had been rationing, a lack of consumer products to purchase. With the conversion of the economy and the high savings rate, there was a lot of money available to get married -- without fear of falling into poverty -- and to have children.

Add to that the G.I. Bill, which enabled many G.I.s to go to school at the expense of the government, to purchase homes with as little as \$1 down, and very generous loan policies for veterans. So public policy did, to an extent, encourage marriage and childbearing.

And consider the negative incentives. Many women lost the jobs they'd held during World War II. Professional schools were closing to women, and women were systematically excluded from areas like law, medicine and business. Women, especially educated women, looked around and saw that their best opportunity for a fulfilling life was to marry a man with the promise to be a good breadwinner. A woman on her own had little opportunity for good occupational advancement.

How were the Cold War and this domestic revival linked?

There was an intangible but powerful cultural emphasis on [security](#) and [family life](#) after World War II that was propelled, in considerable degree, by the onset of the [atomic age](#) and the [tensions](#) and [fears](#) associated with the Cold War. Families could retreat into affluence and consumerism, and focus on rearing children as strong citizens who could become Cold War "warriors" -- scientists, mechanics, and other kinds of productive citizens, who would build a strong country and defeat the global enemy in the future.

There was also intense pressure on people to be apolitical. The [anti-communist crusade](#) was so intense that any kind of dissenting views could be very damaging -- those views could get people fired, or turn them into suspicious figures in their communities.

The ideal of American life promoted around the world focused on the white, middle-class, suburban family, raising upstanding citizens, preparing themselves for any eventuality -- nuclear war (with a safe shelter in their home) or any kind of social problem. Their family roles would offset any danger. Good fathers and strong, wholesome mothers would instill values in their children so they could avoid moral disorder -- for example, unwed pregnancies, juvenile delinquency, homosexuality or any other kind of sexual deviancy. There was strong pressure to conform to the ideal of the heterosexual nuclear family to avoid problems, which were markers of a lack of patriotic virtue. Those were very strong messages at a time when anti-communism was attached to any kind of social dissent.

One of the things that happened around this was that African Americans started to mobilize for [civil rights](#). In the long run, this was endorsed by the federal government. That particular kind of dissent was condoned and supported because the nation's enemies in the Cold War, the Soviet Union and others who were trying to mobilize against the forces of the West, would often point to race relations in the U.S. as hypocrisy. They

pointed out that Americans talked about equality, but people were [segregated](#) and discriminated against -- and, of course, they were right. So the national government -- even [Eisenhower](#), who had little sympathy for the civil rights movement -- was compelled to support it, and later [Kennedy](#) and [Johnson](#) did the same.

What was the reality of married women's employment inside and outside the home in the 1950s?

As women's opportunities in the paid labor force outside the home contracted, women began to infuse the work of being a homemaker with professional virtues. The ideal was not only to be someone who cleaned the house and took care of the kids, but to be someone who became a professional, nurturing and educating her children, managing her household. A lot of women talked about it that way, about making a choice: "I had wanted to be a doctor, but given the realities, I made the choice to be a career homemaker." The schools promoted that too, with domestic science courses, with the idea that women could be full-time wives and mothers -- and this could be a satisfying role. And many women felt that way.

It's interesting that at this time increasing numbers of married women with children were entering the paid labor force. They enjoyed working outside the home, but for working- and middle-class women, the new demand of living a consumer-laden private life required two incomes, so that they could afford all the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle. Women spoke of their work outside the home as jobs, but talked about their careers as homemakers. "I work part-time to pay the bills, but I'm really a career homemaker."

One of the realities of postwar American culture is that the ideal of a classless society, where just about everybody lived a middle-class life -- isn't really true. Though it became possible, especially for veterans' families, to move into comfortable suburban homes, it was much less true for people of color, and even for Jews in some cases, to move into those communities.

It is true that women expanded their homemaking occupations or careers in interesting ways. One way was through volunteer work -- in schools, libraries, churches, and so on. A lot of women's unpaid labor went into keeping their communities running, and we forget that. We've lost a lot of that, of course, today.

Another way women extended their homemaker role was in enterprises, like [Tupperware](#). It was one of several occupations that homemakers could do at home, in their spare time, that became careers. They could sell products to women through their homes or friendship networks, and they could make money; they could become part of a business operation. There were other businesses -- Mary Kay, cosmetic companies -- that enabled women to sell to other women, in ways that didn't really conflict with their homemaker role.

Getting together mid-morning while your kids were at school, having coffee -- the Tupperware enterprise grows out of the professionalization of homemaking, and the

business expertise that went into running a home. It was an extension -- almost a natural extension -- of being a homemaker.

What cultural forces were behind the prevailing gender ideals of the 1950s?

We have to try to immerse ourselves in the moment. There's a combination of humor and disdain when we look back at late 1940s or early 1950s America as a time of innocence or quaintness. It's also kind of a "hot button" moment. Depending what side you were on, it was either the best of times or the worst of times. It's become a politicized moment in our culture. Some people believe it was the last time our country was at its greatest. Then there's the opposite point of view -- that there was horrible racism and sexism and oppression, and since then things have gotten so much better.

In my own research, when I found documents ordinary people wrote about their lives, it was a conflicted time even then. There was a vision of a prosperous future, but it was also a time of great fear. Americans had come out of the war and opened the atomic age. It was a time of political repression. It was also a time when the nation was moving boldly into the international arena for the first time, coming out of World War II as a superpower.

If we bring it down to the ground level, and look particularly at women, they were not simply accepting or internalizing some great, powerful message from Madison Avenue, or Wall Street, or the powers that be, or Congress, that they should be homemakers and be happy with it. Institutions were closing down to women. They, like men, had hopes for the future and anxieties for the present. They made clear choices for the life they felt would make them and their children happy, healthy, and strong. They felt enthusiasm for building these great homes, living these prescribed gender roles.

It was also a strain, and caused huge anxiety. Men and women believe in this dream, and struggle to make it come true. After ten or 20 years they realize the dream was legitimate and promising, but it didn't fully live up to expectations. Many parents gave mixed signals to their children: "we did what we thought we had to do after World War II, and it didn't all work out as we had hoped. You children need to find your own way."

We sometimes lose sight of the fact that the generation of the 60s weren't all rebelling against their parents. They were taking cues from their parents. You see this very strikingly in the letters ordinary housewives wrote to [Betty Friedan](#) after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. They say, "We embraced the feminine mystique because we thought it would provide happiness for our families. But there were dreams I never fulfilled. My children grew up, graduated from high school and went away, and now I don't have what I dreamt about way back."

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/tupperware/sfeature/sf_women.html