

Family Life in the 1950s: Conformity

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In the decades immediately after the end of World War II, many Americans lived more comfortably than they had before the war. Economic security was not without its consequences, however. The pressure to conform to social norms during the Cold War impacted family life and gender roles. Americans were expected to dedicate themselves to building prosperous, stable, nuclear families at the dawn of the nuclear age.

This tutorial gives you an opportunity to examine how the Cold War affected the American family in three parts:

1. Postwar Readjustment and Suburbanization

Before World War II ended, Americans were concerned about reintegrating veterans into civilian life, especially family life. Many soldiers eagerly awaited the opportunity to return home, but they also worried they might not find work in the postwar economy. Doctors warned fiancées, wives, and mothers that returning soldiers might have psychological problems that would make them difficult to live with.

To address these concerns, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the **GI Bill**, in 1944.

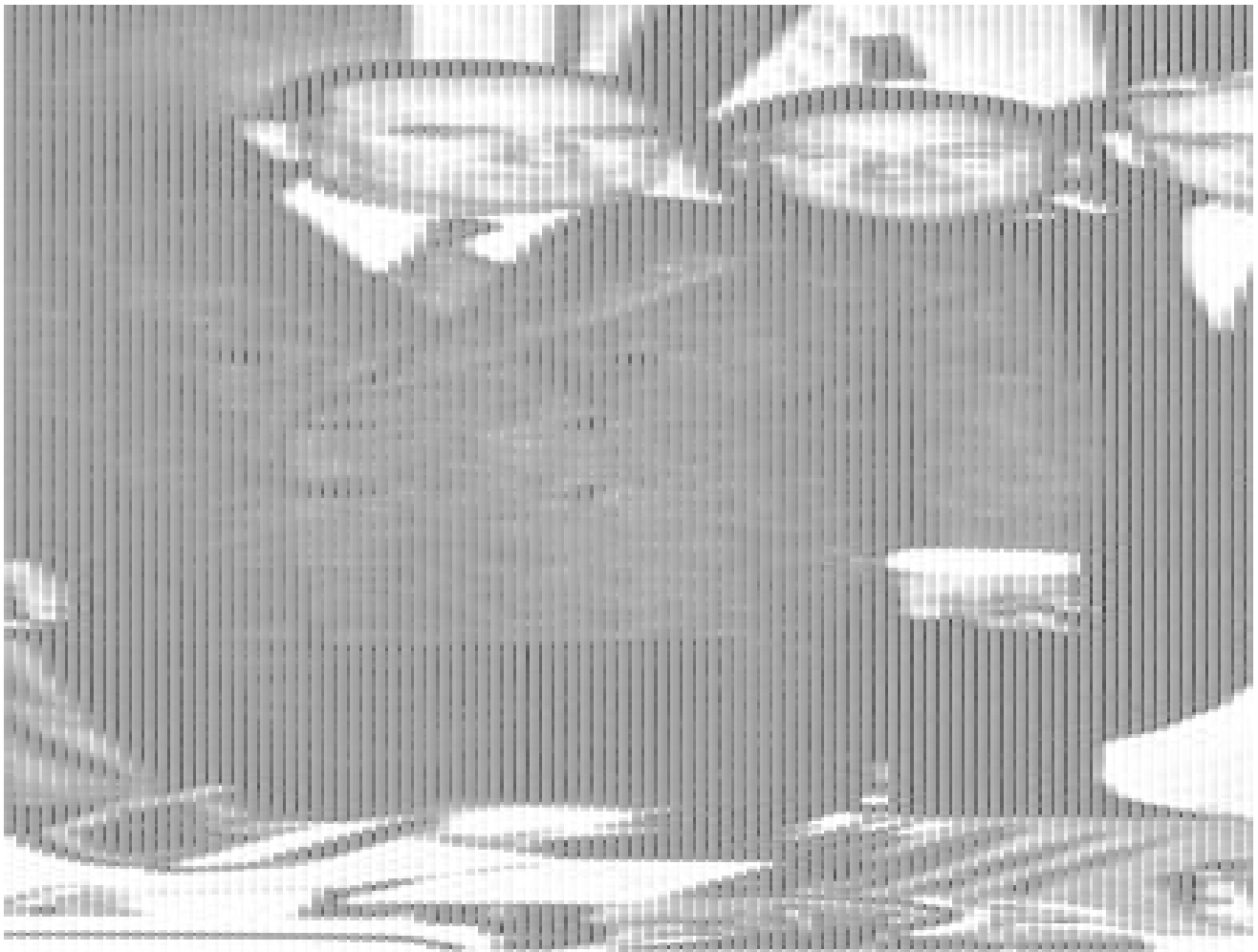


TERM TO KNOW

GI Bill

A program that gave substantial benefits to those who served in World War II.

Among the most significant legislation in American history, the GI Bill provided support to millions of families during the postwar era.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the GI Bill on June 22, 1944. This was just weeks after the Allied invasion of Normandy and more than a year before World War II ended.

Under the terms of the GI Bill, every honorably discharged veteran who had seen active duty was eligible to receive unemployment compensation for 1 year. It also paid the tuition of veterans who chose to attend college or vocational school and provided stipends to cover living expenses as they completed their studies.



DID YOU KNOW

The GI Bill contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of male students at American colleges and universities. More than 2 million former servicemen took advantage of the GI Bill to complete college. By 1950, 7.3% of American men had a college degree (in contrast to 5.5% in 1940). College enrollment increased throughout the postwar era.

Upon graduating from college or vocational school, veterans were prepared for skilled positions in “blue collar” work (e.g., manual labor in factories or in the construction industry). Others were employed in well-paid, “white collar” positions in sales or management or in one of the professions (e.g., law, medicine). Loans provided through the GI Bill also enabled many veterans to start businesses.

Their salaries, along with low-interest loans provided by the GI Bill, enabled veterans to purchase homes for their families in the rapidly developing suburbs of American cities, a phenomenon known as **suburbanization**.



TERM TO KNOW

Suburbanization

A population shift from urban areas into suburbs that accelerated in the United States following World War II.

In addition to the low-interest mortgages available through the GI Bill, other factors contributed to a postwar housing “boom” throughout the country. The following are the most notable of these factors:

- *A nationwide housing shortage during the Great Depression and World War II led to an increased demand for housing after the war.* Housing construction was one of the industries that experienced a severe decline during the Great Depression. As banks collapsed, credit dried up, and investment capital—including capital that could have been invested in housing construction—was scarce. Housing shortages occurred in many cities during World War II as Americans migrated in search of work in wartime industries. The demands of war mobilization made it difficult for the housing industry to meet the demand for new homes. When the war ended, real estate developers and contractors rushed to alleviate the housing shortage.
- *Plenty of land was available for housing construction outside cities.* The unused land on the outskirts of American cities was an ideal location for developers to build new homes. This land was relatively low in population density, and vacant land outside cities cost less than it did within city lines.
- *Prefabricated housing construction techniques made home building more efficient and less expensive.* In addition to taking advantage of cheap land, developers used prefabricated construction techniques to build houses—including plumbing, electrical wiring, and appliances—quickly and cheaply.

Developers built acres and acres of inexpensive tract housing in suburbs throughout the country. One of the developers who took advantage of the situation was William Levitt, who purchased farmland in Nassau County (on Long Island in New York) in 1947 and built a suburban community named **Levittown**.



TERM TO KNOW

Levittown

Suburban housing developments constructed by William Levitt that consisted of thousands of prefabricated houses.

Levitt’s houses cost only \$8,000 and could be purchased with little or no down payment. Families bought more than 1,000 homes on the first day that they were offered for sale.

Levitt built similar developments—also called Levittown—in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. As shown in the aerial photograph below, Levittown and other suburban developments transformed farmers’ fields into rows of prefabricated houses separated by winding streets.



This aerial view of Levittown, Pennsylvania, shows acres of standardized homes. Roads were curved to prevent cars from speeding through the residential communities inhabited by many young families.



A close-up view of the houses in Levittown, New York, in 1958. The house in the center of the photo was located at 47 Sparrow Lane. The names of many of the roads in Levittown and other suburban developments were taken from natural objects or referred to tranquil scenes. This reflected homeowners' desire to escape the hectic pace of urban life.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Of the 13 million homes built in the United States between 1948 and 1958, approximately 11 million were built in suburban areas.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1962, folk singer Malvina Reynolds wrote a song called “Little Boxes” to describe suburbanization. Her song pointed out that although the houses were usually painted in different colors, suburban homes best resembled identical “little boxes” that were “made of ticky tacky”—that is, the cheap or inferior materials that Levitt and other developers used to build them. Search the internet to listen to an audio version of this song!

2. Men at Work

Suburbanization was one indicator that the postwar economy was booming. The construction industry employed thousands of workers, as did the automobile industry because everyone needed a car to commute

between work and home.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The annual production of passenger cars rose from 2.2 million to 8 million between 1946 and 1955. By 1960, about 20% of suburban families owned two cars.

Housing construction and automobiles stimulated growth in affiliated industries, including steel, oil, and lumber. The increased distance between work and home (in the suburbs), combined with the growing number of cars on the road, led to the development of convenience stores, restaurants, and drive-in movie theaters. Consumption habits were changing.



DID YOU KNOW

In April 1955, businessman Ray Kroc built the first modern-style McDonald's restaurant—complete with golden arches—in Des Plaines, Illinois.



The original Des Plaines McDonald's was demolished in the 1980s, but McDonald's Corporation built a replica (pictured here) called the McDonald's #1 Store Museum.

While working-class men found jobs in factories, service industries, and construction, middle-class men with college degrees worked for corporations that had grown substantially during World War II because of defense spending. Continued spending during the Cold War sustained further expansion of these corporations. Some of them became too large for managers to be able to build personal relationships with all of their subordinates. These corporations tended to value conformity to company rules and standards above all else.

Conformity also governed male suburban life. Suburban men were expected to marry young and start a family. Between 1946 and 1964, American families gave birth to the largest generation in U.S. history. This “boom” in the number of babies being born produced the generation known as the **baby boomers**.



TERM TO KNOW

Baby Boomers

Large generation of Americans born between 1946 and 1964.

Because of the emphasis on conformity and family life, bachelorhood was viewed as a brief, temporary state in a man's life. The question of why some men chose to live alone baffled some commentators, as evidenced in the excerpt below from an article titled "Men Without Women," published in *Look* magazine in November 1960.

While reading this excerpt, apply the lens of gender:

Excerpt from "Men Without Women," *Look* Magazine

"Why do these men—more than one-fourth of the males in the United States—choose to live alone? . . . Psychologists, sociologists, and other authorities who have studied this phenomenon have reached these major conclusions about the American bachelor:

1. If a man is still single when he reaches the age of 35, he will probably never marry.
2. Although he may talk constantly of the desire to get married, there is a strong chance that he unconsciously rejects the idea. Most men who really want to get married find a wife by their late-20s.
3. In some cases, even though the desire is genuine, the bachelor may still be single as a result of the increasing mobility of our population. Uprooted by military service or his job, a young man may find it difficult to meet a prospective wife in a strange town or city.
4. The single man's interest in sex is often as intense as that of his married brother—and a revolution in sexual standards has made this less of a problem for the bachelor than it would have been in the early years of this century.
5. Although many bachelors find their lives less carefree than pictured, a substantial number have worked out a pattern of existence that they find thoroughly satisfactory.

Happy, well-adjusted bachelors are, however, a minority among America's unmarried men. Most of them—whether single, widowed or divorced—spend a good portion of their leisure time in a search for a mate."



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What assumptions about male gender roles and family life did you notice in the excerpt above?
2. The article mentions an "increasing mobility of our population." How was that trend a reflection of the postwar economy and work life?

3. Women at Home

While men were expected to start a family and to support it by working, social norms dictated that women remain at home rather than work for wages. This was a significant reversal of the employment gains that

women made during World War II.



DID YOU KNOW

After 1945, many women lost the industrial jobs they held during World War II as men returned home and reentered the workforce.

Raising a family required women to spend most of the day caring for their children and their home. Advertisements for “labor-saving” devices and appliances that promised to make housework easier reinforced these expectations. The spotless homes depicted in movies and TV shows raised housekeeping standards and burdened women with additional housework.

Magazine and newspaper articles reinforced the assumption that women, like men, should marry young. Apply the lens of gender to the excerpt below (from “Women Without Men,” which was also published in *Look* magazine in 1960).

Excerpt from “Women Without Men,” *Look* Magazine

“... a little more than one third of the 62,827,000 women in the United States are getting along without steady male companionship. How do they adjust to this fact of life? How do they like their manless lot? ...

1. Despite the assumption by many males that women cease looking for sex, men and marriage after the age of 50, the fact is that, as one gynecologist put it, ‘they remain interested in all these things until cremation.’
2. Many unattached women of ‘nice’ background are as much drawn to sexual relations with men as married women are, or perhaps more so; relentlessly, they go about most of their lives trying to find sexual fulfillment.
3. Although it is a world-wide and historic conviction that every woman wants to be married, a great many do not want marriage. Consciously or unconsciously, many of them spend a lifetime resisting it.
4. Today, one out of every ten families in the United States is headed by a woman. Many of these women were forced into this role by the death of their husbands or by divorce, while others are the sole support of elderly parents.
5. Hundreds of thousands of young women who have left their homes and moved to the big city in search of work and a husband have found only the work

Almost to a woman, those I interviewed said the same thing: ‘I have only one problem. I would like to be married, but I find it impossible to meet eligible men no matter how I try—and nobody can say I don’t try.’”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What assumptions about female gender roles and family life did you notice in the excerpt above?
2. How does the author reconcile the fact that many women were looking for work with his or her assumption that most women wanted to get married?



BRAINSTORM

1. In what ways does the excerpt from *Look* magazine reinforce traditional assumptions about male and female gender roles?
2. What evidence does the excerpt provide to support the claim that many men and women chose not to conform to expected gender roles?

The *Look* article states that most of the single women who were interviewed wanted to be married. However, one out of 10 families in the United States was headed by a woman. This reveals that not all women were willing or able to live in a male-led household. Contrary to the assumptions (and advertisements) of the day, approximately 40% of women with young children and half of women with older children sought part- or full-time employment during the 1950s. Statistics like these indicated the desire of many women to enter the workforce. They also showed that the everyday necessities of middle-class suburban life required money—to purchase second cars, vacations, and college education for their children.



SUMMARY

During the late 1950s, millions of Americans enjoyed the affluence of suburban life. However, with comfortable living came an expectation of conformity to social norms. It was assumed that men would enter the workforce and become breadwinners for their families. Women were expected to be wives and homemakers. Advertisements, periodicals, and even folk songs reflected these gender-based expectations, even though they were not attainable for all Americans.

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REFERENCES

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- E. Harris, "Men Without Women," *Look*, Nov 22, 1960, OER Commons <http://bit.ly/2oPHmjQ>
- M. Reynolds, "Little Boxes," 1962, Lyrics, WKU bit.ly/2oQ8fnN



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