

BETTY FRIEDAN

THE PROBLEM THAT HAS NO NAME

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. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. 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. Some women, in their forties and fifties, still remembered painfully giving up those dreams, but most of the younger women no longer even thought about them. A thousand expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children. ...

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. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor. They baked their own bread, sewed their own and their children's clothes, kept their new washing machines and dryers running all day. They changed the sheets on the beds twice a week instead of once, took the rughoolag class in adult education, and pitied their poor frustrated mothers, who had dreamed of having a career. Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife."

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. ...

Gradually I came to realize that the problem that has no name was shared by countless women in America.

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 a woman would tell me that the feeling gets so strong she runs out of the house and walks through the streets. Or she stays inside her house and cries. Or her children tell her a joke, and she doesn't laugh because she doesn't hear it. I talked to women who had spent years on the analyst's couch, working out their "adjustment to the feminine role," their blocks to "fulfillment as a wife and mother." But the desperate tone in these women's voices, and the look in their eyes, was the same as the tone and the look of other women, who were sure they had no problem, even though they did have a strange feeling of desperation.

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? ... 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:

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 flat we had when I was working. The children are at school all day. It's not the work. I just don't feel alive. ...

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."

Letters to Betty Freidan

14 May 1963

Brookline, Mass.

My life spans the two eras—the ebb tide of feminism and the rise of the “mystique.” My parents were products of the early 20th century Liberalism and believed firmly that everyone—poor, Negroes, and women too—had a right to have a “rendezvous with Destiny.” ...My feelings of betrayal is not directed against society so much as at the women who beat the drums for the “passionate journey” into darkness...My undiluted wrath is expended on those of us who were educated, and therefore privileged, who put on our black organza nightgowns and went willingly, joyful, without so much as a backward look at the hard-won freedoms handed down to us by the feminists (men and women). The men, in my experience, were interested bystanders, bewildered, amused, and maybe a bit joyful at having two mommies at home—one for the children and one for themselves... My children grew up in the mystique jungle but somehow escaped it.

13 March 1963

Ridgewood, NJ

...[I am] the mother of five and the wife of a successful partner in an investment banking firm. In seeking that something “more” out of life, I have tried large doses of everything from alcohol to religion, from a frenzy of sports activities to PTA...to every phase of church work... Each served its purpose at the time, but I suddenly realized that none had any real future. Our children are all in school except for the baby... However, I felt that if I waited until she’s in school I’ll be too close to forty to learn any new tricks. I’ve seen too many women day they would “do something” when the last child went to school. The something has usually been bridge, bowling, or drinking.

24 August 1963

Pittsburg, PA

...I entered graduate school at Yale, met a man, left school, and married in 1951. I have since then moved thirteen times, lived in eight states, had four miscarriages, and produced two children... Finally, when I fill out the income tax now, it is occupation: Painter, not housewife... My one advantage over the rest of my generation is, I suppose, the fact that I was raised in a family of feminists... I still tend, belatedly and belligerently, to champion women’s rights. The cloying and sentimental public effort of the last decade to raise the prestige of the home and represent it as demanding all that we have to give has more than once precipitated me into incoherent outrage...

21 January 1963

New York City

...Since scientific findings reveal the strong effect of the child's environment upon the child, the poor mother has been made to replace God in her omnipotence. It is the terror of this misinterpreted omnipotence that in many cases keeps women at home. I still remember the tear-stained face of a brilliant young woman economist who had earned a Ph.D. in her field when she had to give up a newly discovered exciting job because her pediatrician convinced her that her six- and three-year-old children would become social menaces without her presence 24 hours a day...[Quoting a school official:] "Show me a delinquent child and I'll show you a working mother."

Rockaway, New York

...What is wrong with the women trapped in the Feminine Mystique is what is wrong with men trapped in the Rat Race... Isn't it true that one of the problems, the biggest really, of our present day society is that there isn't enough meaningful creative work for anyone these days? Isn't that one of the reasons mothers are taking their parental role with the seriousness of a career?

23 April 1963

Leicester, Mass.

For the last few years, I have been on the "old housekeeping merry-go round." ...I cleaned and cleaned...and then I cleaned some more! All day—every day. My mother had returned to teaching school when I was twelve, and I had resented it, and consequently vowed that when I married and had children I would make it my vocation. I was quite convinced that I was very happy with my role in life as we had our own home and my husband is a good husband and father and a very sufficient provider. However, one night last November, all Hell broke loose in my psyche. I was sitting calmly reading when I became overwhelmed with waves of anxiety. I couldn't imagine what was happening... I visited my family doctor. He put me on tranquilizers and diagnosed it as a mild state of anxiety. However there was no explanation...I chose security over everything else...I felt I had something about it...I now have a goal and no longer feel like a vegetable.

23 October 1963

Queens Village, NY

[Written by a woman recalling the realities and perspectives of her emigrant family in the 1930s.]

...The emigrant mother often had to work not only in her home, but outside as well, under the most harrowing conditions...For the son, it was important and necessary to obtain an education, so

he could escape the sweatshop labor of his father. For the daughter, however, the most precious legacy was an escape from the hard work and drudgery of her mother and the attainment of leisure—the very leisure this emigrant mother never knew herself, and which she so desperately needed... To this emigrant mother, education was only necessary for her son to get a better job, and the daughter, with nothing else beside her femininity, would, with luck, marry well and thereby achieve the leisure her mother never knew.

4 August 1964

Glen Ridge, NJ

Most of us would be delighted to chuck the wage earning back in our husbands' laps and devote ourselves exclusively to homemaking and community projects. We worry about the children when we're at work. We don't really like to throw the last load of clothes in the washer at 11:30 PM, and set the alarm for 6:00 so we can iron a blouse for a school-age daughter, fix breakfast and school lunches all at the same time, do as much housework as possible before bolting for the office, and face the rest of it, and the grocery shopping and preparing dinner when we get home. This isn't our idea of fulfillment. It doesn't make us more interesting people or more stimulating companions for our husbands. It just makes us very, very tired.

29 May 1964

Folcroft, PA

Believe me, a modern woman of today would have to be *four* women to be everything that is expected of her... My husband wants me to work not for the satisfaction I might get out of working, but for the extra money he will have for himself... But, how about the extra burden it would put on me? I would go out to work if possible, but I cannot do that and come home to a house full of screaming kids, dishes piled in the sink, and mountains of laundry to do. It is no fun to come home and see the sweet, dear, lazy bum asleep on the couch after being on my feet all day. He still likes his homemade pies, cakes, and appetizing meals... I have worked in stores; the post office; given dinners for a pot and pan outfit; minded children; and sold things door to door. At present, I take in sewing and ironing... If I work, then my housework suffers and I get told about that. I would like nothing better than to just do my own work, have some time to myself once in a while so I could just go downtown once in [a] while without having someone else's work staring at me. I get very tired of reading about women working outside the home... I cannot divide myself into more than one person... I have plenty to occupy my time and I happen to enjoy being a housewife... My husband... thinks it's great for women to work, but until men get some of their Victorian ideas out of their heads then I cannot go to work.

He thinks he would lose some of his masculinity if anyone saw him hanging out the wash, or washing dishes. And if he had to give up any of his fishing or hunting or running around visiting his buddies to keep an eye on the kids, well, I'm not killing myself for the almighty dollar.