

'What is a wife'? Reconstructing domesticity in postwar Britain before *The Feminine Mystique***Caitríona Beaumont**

This article investigates the relationship between the lived experiences of housewives in 1950s and early 1960s Britain and their portrayal in The Feminine Mystique and popular women's magazines. Through a study of four housewives' associations, the Women's Institutes, Mothers' Union, Townswomen's Guilds and the National Council of Women, it is argued that they rejected the prevailing ideology of domesticity and challenged the myth of the 'happy housewife'. As a result housewives' associations presented a modern interpretation of domesticity where wives and mothers not only cared for their husbands and children but also made an important contribution to wider society. As equal citizens women were entitled to state support and housewives' associations were successful in articulating the demands of women as wives, mothers and paid employees. In doing so housewives' associations presented a much more nuanced account of women's everyday lives illustrating that not all women succumbed to the feminine mystique.

Keywords: housewives' associations, citizenship, domesticity, equality, wives, mothers.

In the 27 April 1963 edition of the British magazine *Woman*, a sixteen page supplement entitled 'A Housewife's Treasury: How to Keep your Husband Happy' was included for readers to detach and keep. The booklet provided clear advice for 'Mrs. 1963' on

WHAT IS A WIFE? A girl who works from nine to five and whips up apple pie for supper. A woman who sets jam to jell, children to rights and her hair for a Saturday night out.

How does she do it? With a magic mix of instinct, effort, wise ways learned from Mum and wily wrinkles discovered in desperation.

Why does she do it? Because somebody thinks she's wonderful – and she wants to go on keeping it that way.¹

Readers were given a list of ways to keep their husbands happy. This included ensuring his meal is ready when he comes in from work, his food is good, his clothes are ready to wear 'buttons

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¹ *Woman*, 27 April 1963, 41.

on, shirts clean, trousers pressed – sorry, no short cuts!’ The house must also be kept tidy but ‘you can leave his gloves, paper, tools, clutter – that’s not mess!’ Finally wives were reminded that ‘**IF** you make him think he’s wonderful (by looking neat, smiling often, talking sometimes, understanding always – you’re the girl that he fell in love with)’.²

The booklet provided housewives with tips and advice on how to carry out their role. Cleaning, cooking, taking care of household bills, entertaining adults and children, were all included. Once again the needs of the husband were foregrounded with sections entitled ‘convince him with your cooking’ and ‘make him think you’re clever’. Here wives were told to demonstrate their ‘cleverness’ through their cooking skills and ingenuity, for instance the ability to make perfect gravy. A clever wife was also one who avoided waste and readers were warned to ‘waste not, or he’ll want you not’.³ Wives going out to work were advised to get home first so that everything would be ready for their husband’s return and to get up twenty minutes earlier in the morning to tidy the house before going out to work.⁴ The language used throughout the supplement was unequivocal with repeated references to ‘him’, for example ‘blind him with science’, ‘cosset him’, ‘give him glamour on a plate’ and ‘sweeten him up’. There can be no doubt what readers were being told: ‘Mrs. 1963’ should revolve around her husband and no one else’s needs, least of all her own.

In the same year that *Woman* presented readers with ‘The Housewife’s Treasury’, Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking text, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published in the U.S. and Britain and quickly became a bestseller.⁵ Friedan’s book directly challenged the concept of the ‘happy housewife heroine’ as portrayed in American and British women’s magazines in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead she argued that millions of American women had fallen victim to what she called the ‘feminine mystique’. Friedan posited that since the end of the Second World War women had been persuaded by educators, social scientists, popular women’s magazines and advertisers that it was only through their role as housewife and mother that women could find true fulfillment.⁶ She went on to suggest that American housewives were becoming increasingly frustrated, bored and dissatisfied with their lot, and that this unhappiness could be identified as ‘the problem that has no name’.⁷

In the final chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan presented a ‘new life plan for women’. She advised women to reject the idealized image of the housewife in magazines, advertisements and popular culture. Moreover, they should cast off the assumption that marriage, housework

² Ibid., 41.

³ Ibid., 47.

⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963). See also Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (London: Berg, 2004), 144-155.

⁶ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” *The Journal of American History* 79 (1993): 1455.

⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), 5.

and motherhood were the ultimate career choices for women. Instead Friedan encouraged women to engage in education and paid work so that they could integrate 'a serious, lifelong commitment to society with marriage and motherhood' and make a contribution to political life 'not as "housewives" but as citizens'.⁸ To do so would allow women to leave behind the 'conflicts and unnecessary frustrations they will feel as wives and mothers' and ensure that their daughters would not 'make mistaken choices for lack of a full image of woman's identity'.⁹

The aim of this article is to investigate the relationship between the lived experiences of housewives and the representation of wives and mothers in *The Feminine Mystique* and 'The Housewife's Treasury'. Were housewives at this time devoted to home and family to the exclusion of most other things or did they have lives outside the home allowing them to participate in the social, economic and political life of the nation? This question is important as one of the major legacies of Friedan's work is the widely held belief, both within the historiography and the public imagination, that throughout the 1950s and early 1960s women succumbed to a dominant ideology of domesticity. The consequences of this have been far reaching with many historians, sociologists and feminists regarding these years as a time when activism amongst women demanding gender equality stagnated. As Joyce Freeguard writes 'women of the 1950s have been marginalized by historians and commentators in the 1970s and early 1980s because, it was thought, they had little to offer feminist or women's history'.¹⁰

Recently academics in many countries have questioned Friedan's account of women's lives in the 1950s. Few would underestimate the key role that *The Feminine Mystique* played in inspiring the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement or Friedan's ability to identify with and speak directly to women struggling to adapt to their roles as housewives and mothers.¹¹ It has even been argued that the book 'helped transform the course of American's political and social history'.¹² However, some have challenged Friedan's research methods, her selection of sources and the fact she presented herself as a housewife when she was also an experienced journalist and active trade unionist.¹³ The American academic Joanne Meyerowitz has written that having at first accepted Friedan's account of women's lives in postwar America she began to question this interpretation because 'as I investigated the public culture, I

⁸ Ibid., 300, 307.

⁹ Ibid., 300.

¹⁰ Joyce Freeguard, "It's Time for Women of the 1950s to Stand Up and Be Counted" (D. Phil. thesis, University of Sussex, 2004), 1. One notable exception is an article published by the Birmingham Feminist History Group, "Feminism as femininity in the nineteen-fifties?," *Feminist Review* 3 (1979): 48-65.

¹¹ See for example Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic, 2011).

¹² Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 4.

¹³ See for example Daniel Horowitz, "Rethinking Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America," *American Quarterly* 48 (1996): 1-42, and Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*.

encountered...books, articles, and films that contradicted the domestic ideology'.¹⁴ Eva Moskowitz supports this view and writes that during the 1950s and 1960s popular magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* frequently included images of 'unhappy, angry and depressed women'.¹⁵

Meyerowitz, following her own study of popular women's magazines during the period 1946 to 1958, argued that this literature 'did not simply glorify domesticity or demand that women return to or stay at home...all of the magazines sampled advocated both the domestic and the non-domestic, sometimes in the same sentence'.¹⁶ Meyerowitz concludes that 'postwar authors did not, as Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* would have it, side automatically with "sexual passivity, male domination and nurturing maternal love". They portrayed the ideal marriage as an equal partnership, with each partner intermingling traditional masculine and feminine roles.'¹⁷ Instead of persuading women to embrace domesticity and a life within the home, she maintains that in fact 'popular magazines incorporated women's public participation as part of a positive image of the modern American woman in the postwar world'.¹⁸

Similar arguments have been made in the Australian context. Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, in *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (2004), write that surveys of Australian women's magazines in the postwar period support Meyerowitz's conclusions. They suggest that

rather than simply articulating the suppressed voice of women, Friedan was constituting what has become a central shibboleth of the feminist past in reinterpreting the women's magazines of the post-war period. The "happy housewife myth" was not a product of popular culture itself but a myth – a myth of a myth – conjured up by feminism in the attempt to construct a narrative that would make sense of and dispel the sense of contradiction and tension women felt between public achievement and femininity.¹⁹

In their work Johnson and Lloyd demonstrate how women's organisations in Australia, for example the Federated Housewives Association and the Australian Housewives' Association, encouraged members to get involved in life outside the home based on a 'philosophy of

¹⁴ Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique," 1456.

¹⁵ Eva Moskowitz, "'It's Good to Blow our Top': Women's Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent, 1945-1965," *Journal of Women's History* 8 (1996): 67.

¹⁶ Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique," 1458.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1471.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1469.

¹⁹ Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (New York: Berg, 2004), 11.

citizenship'. This citizenship was articulated through 'service, moral responsibility and collective endeavour'.²⁰

Rather than assuming that housewives in the 1950s were the victims of domesticity, the history of housewives' associations in Australia reveals that during these years housewives were actively campaigning on a wide range of social welfare reforms. These demands included the payment of family allowances, the provision of home helps, good housing, free holidays for tired or sick mothers and crèches in municipal shopping centres.²¹ So instead of envisaging the home as the site of oppression for women, as Friedan would have it, Johnson and Lloyd suggest that 'in certain contexts in the 1940s and 1950s, home represented, for women, the site of their agency'.²²

Historical and feminist accounts of the lives of housewives in Britain during the 1950s and early 1960s echo assumptions made about the experiences of wives and mothers in the U.S. and Australia. With over two-thirds of British women aged twenty to sixty four identified as full-time housewives in 1951, it is perhaps not surprising that this period has been regarded as a time when British women succumbed to the ideology of domesticity.²³ Indeed these years have often been characterized as a 'nadir of British feminism' and, according to Wendy Webster, 'as a period in waiting for something else'.²⁴ That 'something else' was the rejection of the 'happy housewife' myth by young women in the late 1960s.

As in the U.S. and Australia, the impression that women in Britain were actively encouraged to become full-time housewives and mothers in the postwar period predominates. The state, through its education policies and the implementation of social welfare reforms, combined with the popularity of women's magazines advocating marriage and motherhood and the difficulties women faced in accessing well paid jobs and suitable childcare, all appear to have conspired to consign women to the role of housewife.²⁵ Dennis Dean remarks that the 1950s mark the culmination of British plans for postwar reconstruction which reflected a 'strategy...to present the home and family as agents of social cohesion in a world of change. This was promoted in schools, cinemas and magazines'.²⁶

²⁰ Ibid., 28.

²¹ Ibid., 31.

²² Ibid., 38.

²³ Rachel Ritchie, "The Housewife and the Modern: The Home and Appearance in Women's Magazines, 1954-1969" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2011), 22.

²⁴ Martin Pugh questions if the years 1945 to 1959 were the 'nadir of British Feminism' in *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, second edition, 2000), 284-311. Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-1964* (London: Routledge, 1998), xxi.

²⁵ See for example Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 117-147, Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 222-255 and Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, 284-311.

²⁶ Dennis Dean, "Education for moral improvement, domesticity and social cohesion: the Labour Government, 1945-51," in *Equality and Inequality in Education Policy*, eds. Janet Holland et al. (Clevedon:

Any endorsement of traditional family life in postwar Britain could not be achieved without acknowledging the contribution of wives and mothers inside and outside the home. Barbara Caine notes that 'in the period after the war, and more particularly in the late 1950s and 1960s, there was much attention paid to the woman question, on radio, in fiction, and in social, psychological, and sociological research'.²⁷ There is no doubt that much of this debate and discussion focused on the desire to maintain traditional gender roles at a time when increasing numbers of married women undertook paid work. As a result of on-going labour shortages and the demands of the economy, both private and public sector employers wished to recruit more women workers in the postwar period. In 1951, 43 percent of female employees were married; this rose to 52 percent by 1959.²⁸ Many mothers at this time worked part-time, which allowed them to work outside the home whilst continuing to care for home and family.

The majority of this employment was low skilled and low paid, with the number of women finding employment in skilled work falling from 15.5 percent in 1951 to 13.9 percent in 1961.²⁹ The general consensus was that women with young children should care for them full-time at home and seek paid work only when they reached school age. Popular texts such as John Bowlby's *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (1951) emphasized the importance of maternal care for young children. Publications such as this warned parents that if mothers did not develop a good relationship with their infant children then the likelihood of these children becoming juvenile delinquents was increased.³⁰ The publication in 1956 of Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein's influential study *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work* further endorsed the idea that mothers with young children should stay at home and only go out to work when their children were older.³¹ 'Working wives' were encouraged to go out to work but to do so following a 'dual-role' model which allowed women to ensure their families were cared for by working part-time once their children began to attend school.

Despite the clearly changing context of the 1950s with increasing numbers of married mothers going out to work (albeit when their children were older), more women's magazines promoted marriage and motherhood. The circulation of *Women's Weekly*, *Woman* and *Women's Own* reached a peak with *Woman* recording a weekly circulation of almost 3.5 million copies in the late 1950s. This equated to five out of every six British women reading at least one magazine per week.³² Dominant themes featured in these magazines throughout the period 1949 to 1974 included, 'Getting and Keeping Your Man', 'The Happy Family', 'Heart Versus Head' and 'The

Multilingual Matters, 1995), 28, cited in Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and the Family in England, c. 1945-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 178.

²⁷ Caine, *English Feminism*, 240.

²⁸ Freeguard, "It's Time for Women of the 1950s," 72.

²⁹ Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* (London: Routledge, 2005), 204.

³⁰ Dolly Smith-Wilson, "A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-war Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 17 (2006): 210.

³¹ Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work* (London: Routledge, 1956).

³² Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, 292.

Working Wife is a Bad Wife'.³³ *Woman's 'Mrs. 1963'* was therefore not an isolated depiction of the housewife within popular culture at this time. This image prevailed on radio as articulated in an edition of the BBC's *Woman's Hour*, first aired on 11 May 1950. The popular radio programme asked four husbands to discuss the attributes of the perfect wife. Perhaps not surprisingly the ideal wife was defined as a woman who was a great cook and housekeeper but also a 'good looker', who shared her husband's interests and was always willing to listen to and pay attention to him.³⁴ The similarities between this description of the perfect wife and that of *Woman's 'Mrs. 1963'* are striking.

However, it is difficult to ascertain how much influence the ideas and images in women's magazines and in the media had on readers and if, as Friedan argued in the U.S. context, they contributed to 'the feminine mystique'. Marjorie Ferguson observes that women's lives in the 1950s and 1960s were often more complicated than women's magazines suggest revealing a tension between 'traditional and emergent female roles, between what women's magazine words were saying and what women were doing'.³⁵ Rachel Ritchie's study of women's magazines during the years 1954 to 1969 emphasizes that these publications were 'highly ambiguous' making it difficult to determine how they influenced women's lives.³⁶ Through her inclusion of a more diverse range of magazines and journals for women, Ritchie demonstrates, like Meyerowitz, that these publications mirrored the many dimensions of women's lives and the everyday difficulties women experienced, rather than just glorifying domesticity.³⁷ This was also true of television and cinema in the 1950s.³⁸ In 1958, for instance, a BBC television documentary on a day in the life of three married couples highlighted the loneliness and isolation some of the mothers experienced at home whilst their husbands were away at work. When asked if they were happy in their roles, one of the mothers replied 'no, not at all'. She went on to explain how hard the demands of housework and childcare were and that she found the roles 'quite exhausting'.³⁹

Such examples clearly confront the prevailing view of Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s as a time when domesticity and the myth of the 'happy housewife' dominated women's lives. The activities and campaigns by a number of feminist pressure groups for gender equality throughout the decade further challenge this view. Despite dismissals of the 1950s as a period of decline for the women's movement, more recent research has demonstrated that women

³³ Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 44-77.

³⁴ BBC Radio, The Light Programme, *Woman's Hour*, 11 May 1950
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/marriage/10517.shtml>, (accessed 12 March 2015).

³⁵ Ferguson, *Forever Feminine*, 77. See also Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb*, 155-159.

³⁶ Ritchie, "The Housewife and the Modern," 34.

³⁷ In her study Ritchie features the magazines: *Woman*, *Home and Country* and *Woman's Outlook*.

³⁸ See for example Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³⁹ BBC Television Service, *Now We Are Married*, 11 April 1958
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/marriage/10502.shtml>, (accessed 12 March 2015).

achieved some significant gains during these years.⁴⁰ Linda Perriton's work on the Federation of British Professional and Business Women and Freeguard's account of the campaigning work of a number of women's groups, including the Married Woman's Association, the British Federation of University Women and National Women Citizens' Association, offer alternative histories of women in the postwar years.⁴¹

My own research on the history of housewives' associations in England between 1928 and 1964 refutes the perception that housewives and mothers acquiesced to the lives prescribed for them by women's magazines and popular understandings of family life.⁴² As in Australia, housewives' organisations in the U.K. during the 1950s and early 1960s engaged in a wide range of activities, including campaigning on issues of importance to women's lives. As a result, the English experience echoes Johnson and Lloyd's findings that the home could represent a site of agency for women. Rather than domesticity always being regarded as oppressive for women during this period, as Friedan implied, it can be argued that the reality was more complicated. Many women found satisfaction in their domestic role and used it as a means to engage in life outside the home. In the U.S., Jo Gill has argued that writers such as Phyllis McGinley offered an alternative, more positive perspective of domesticity for women, which contradicted Friedan's claims.⁴³ Similarly Claire Langhamer suggests that in 1950s Britain domesticity was 'increasingly viewed as a rational choice for women, a possible source of delight and an opportunity to exercise real skill'.⁴⁴

Housewives' associations continued to be extremely popular in England in the years following the Second World War.⁴⁵ This is not surprising at a time when a significant number of women, and in particular those with young children, were full-time housewives and mothers. The most popular housewives' organisations included the Women's Institutes (WI) for rural women, the Mothers' Union (MU) for Anglican women and the Townswomen's Guilds (TG) for women living in urban areas. In 1954 the WI had a membership of 476,000, the MU (in the British Isles),

⁴⁰ For example equal pay for equal work was introduced into the public sector from 1955, the 1958 Maintenance Orders Act provided financial provision for divorced women with children and in 1958 women were granted the right to sit as life peeresses in the House of Lords.

⁴¹ Linda Perriton, "Forgotten Feminists: the Federation of British Professional and Business Women, 1933-1969," *Women's History Review* 16 (2007): 79-97, and Freeguard, "It's Time for Women of the 1950s". See also Samantha Clements, "Feminism, citizenship and social activity: the role and importance of local women's organisations, Nottingham 1918-1969" (D. Phil thesis, University of Nottingham, 2008).

⁴² Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

⁴³ Jo Gill, "'Quite the opposite of a feminist': Phyllis McGinley, Betty Friedan and discourses of gender in mid-century American culture," *Women's History Review* 22 (2013): 422-439.

⁴⁴ Claire Langhamer, "The Meanings of Home in Post-War Britain," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005): 356-7.

⁴⁵ Caitríona Beaumont, "Housewives, Workers and Citizens: Voluntary Women's Organisations and the Campaign for Women's Rights in England and Wales during the Post-War Period," in *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state Actors in Society and Politics Since 1945*, eds. Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton and James McKay (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 59-76.

481,623 and the TG, 131, 000. The National Council of Women (NCW), an umbrella organisation for some ninety-seven women's organisations, was also active at this time representing the interests of housewives, mothers and women workers in postwar society.⁴⁶ All of these organisations embraced the concept of domesticity, traditional gender roles and the belief that mothers were at the centre of family life. As a result these groups did not self-identify as feminist. Rather they were part of a wider women's movement, which included feminist, mainstream, conservative and religious women's groups, all of whom wished to enhance the status of women.⁴⁷

Despite their reluctance to be associated with feminism, the WI, MU, TG and NCW wanted to promote the concept of citizenship and championed the rights and duties of women as democratic citizens. In common with Australian housewives' organisations, this 'philosophy' of citizenship acknowledged women's political, social and economic rights as equal citizens. In return, women had duties as citizens, and this required them to not only care for their husbands and families but also to contribute to life outside their homes, to get involved in local and national affairs and to be vocal on issues affecting themselves and their families.⁴⁸

In adhering to this belief in active citizenship, housewives' associations rejected the myth of the 'happy housewife' as espoused in women's magazines. Instead these organisations endeavoured to present housewives and mothers as intelligent, responsible and skilled women. Consequently, housewives and mothers had an important contribution to make to debates about the role of women in postwar society and were successful in presenting a modern alternative to the 'happy housewife'.

Housewives' organisations rejected the image of the 'perfect wife' in their own publications. The TG told readers of *The Townswoman* that a housewife was more than the 'frilly little woman' and 'pretty creature' whose ultimate aim in life was to 'pamper her skin and create the "house beautiful"'.⁴⁹ The *Mother's Union News* warned women not to make an 'idol out of domesticity' and to ignore suggestions that housewives and mothers should devote their lives entirely to husbands and children.⁵⁰ Instead of conforming to these stereotypes, these organisations encouraged women to embrace their responsibilities as active citizens. This meant that wives and mothers should get involved in local organisations, including religious, feminist and political groups. The TG, WI, MU and NCW encouraged such activities despite remaining avowedly non-party political and non-feminist. Nevertheless they believed it was crucial for women to engage in public life and to stand for election so that female

⁴⁶ Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 190.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-67.

⁴⁹ *The Townswoman*, February 1963.

⁵⁰ *Mothers' Union News*, 1 January 1964. See also Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 190-194.

representation in formal politics would increase.⁵¹ Thus whilst Friedan called upon women to make a contribution to politics and society as citizens and not housewives, housewives' associations in Britain encouraged their members to contribute to local and national affairs as housewives *and* citizens. To them the two were not mutually exclusive. It was the experience of being a housewife and mother which allowed women to make a unique contribution to public life.

So how did housewives' organisations represent the interests of wives and mothers in the 1950s and early 1960s and how did they demonstrate that members were active citizens with interests 'beyond the kitchen sink'? As has been suggested, the reality of women's lives in postwar Britain was multifaceted and so undermined images of the 'perfect wife' prevalent in popular women's magazines. Women in the 1950s faced significant new challenges in their daily lives. These included balancing domestic responsibilities with paid work, ensuring their children did not grow up to be delinquents, becoming consumer experts, and for middle-class women, managing their homes and housework without the help of domestic servants.⁵² Working-class wives still faced difficulties in bringing up their families in poor housing conditions and for those moving to new homes in the suburbs, adapting to life away from kinship networks could prove problematic.⁵³

Webster has highlighted the problems faced by immigrant women coming to work in the U.K. in the 1950s. Unlike native white women, British society viewed them as workers rather than as wives and mothers who struggled to combine paid work with domestic responsibilities.⁵⁴ Set apart from the 'ideology of domesticity', immigrant women were criticised for being 'bad mothers' and, as Angela Davis writes, 'when white women were still being encouraged to stay at home and embrace domesticity and consumerism, the state was not prepared to offer any childcare support to those non-indigenous women who had to work'.⁵⁵ Housewives' associations such as the WI, MU, TG and NCW, aware of the realities of women's lives, endeavoured to assist women in negotiating their roles as wives, mothers, workers, consumers and active citizens in the postwar years. It should be noted, however, that during the 1950s these organisations represented a white, middle-class sensibility. Despite having both working-

⁵¹ The number of women elected to parliament remained marginal during the 1950s and 1960s with only twenty-nine women MPs (less than 5 percent of all Members of Parliament) elected in 1964. See Kirsta Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c. 1689-1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 127.

⁵² See Smith-Wilson, "A New Look at the Affluent Worker", Matthew Hilton, "Consumer Politics in Post-war Britain," in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, eds. Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 241-259, and Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb*.

⁵³ Mark Clapson, "Working-class Women's Experiences of Moving to New Housing Estates in England since 1919," *Twentieth Century British History*, 10 (1999): 345-365.

⁵⁴ Webster, *Imagining Home*.

⁵⁵ Social workers, probation officers, teachers and others in authority criticized women who worked full-time for being 'bad mothers'. See Smith-Wilson, "A New Look at the Affluent Worker" and Davis, *Modern Motherhood*, 143.

class and middle-class members, well educated, middle-class women dominated the leadership of each group. There is little evidence that these organisations discussed the issues of race and racial inequality at any great length either at local or national level throughout the 1950s.⁵⁶ Like Friedan in the U.S., these organisations assumed that the universal experience of British women in this decade was that of white, predominantly middle-class women, and the activities and campaign work of each group reflected this viewpoint.⁵⁷

Paid work for married mothers was one of the most challenging and contentious issues faced by housewives' organisations during the 1950s. Whilst this was often overlooked in popular women's magazines, the WI, TG, MU and NCW were at the heart of discussions on whether or not mothers should go out to work. Perhaps not surprisingly considering their embrace of traditional gender roles, these organisations shared the wider contemporary consensus that mothers with young children should be at home full-time. However it is important to acknowledge that feminist women's groups, trade unions, political parties, social workers, psychologists and the majority of men and women also believed this was the normal and natural way for families to operate.⁵⁸ Even Friedan accepted that women with babies and young children might wish to temporarily give up full-time work before resuming their careers.⁵⁹

Much more contentious were the ever-increasing numbers of older married women, with children of school age, taking up paid work outside the home. Whilst the experience of paid work for working-class mothers, needing to augment their family income, was not a new phenomenon the idea that significant numbers of middle-class mothers would choose to go out to work was something new. Rather than condemning these 'working wives' as 'bad mothers' who were neglecting their husbands and children, housewives organisations sought to support women who wished to work. Dolly Smith-Wilson has argued that working mothers in the 1950s challenged existing constructions of domesticity by demonstrating that paid work for mothers was compatible with family life.⁶⁰ Middle-class mothers now had the option to contribute to the family income whilst continuing to care for their husbands and children. This social and economic change resulted in a new understanding of the 'family wage' with both working-class and middle-class wives and mothers increasingly shouldering some of the burden of family expenditure.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Towards the end of the 1950s the NCW did begin to discuss the issue of race relations and racial inequality calling for greater tolerance and understanding being black and white citizens. *The Guardian*, 31 October 1960.

⁵⁷ For a critique of Friedan on race, see bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1987).

⁵⁸ See for example Pearl Jephcott, Nancy Seear and John Smith, *Married Women Working* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962).

⁵⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (2010 edition), 308.

⁶⁰ Smith-Wilson, "A New Look at the Affluent Worker," 207. See also Freeguard, "Its Time for Women of the 1950s," 70-95.

⁶¹ See Stephen Brooke, "Gender and Working Class Identity in Britain during the 1950s," *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2001): 774-775.

The 'dual-role' for women as housewives and workers was well established in Britain by the end of the 1950s but the question of how women could best balance these two roles was a major source of concern for housewives associations throughout the decade. The NCW was particularly active in investigating this new dimension to the lives of wives and mothers, and in 1956 it sent out a questionnaire to members to discover 'the effects on the family of the employment of married women with children'.⁶² The results of this survey, published in 1957, indicated that primary reason married women chose to take up paid work was economic. These women wanted not only to boost their family income but also to acquire some degree of economic independence for themselves. This is significant as it suggests that rather than succumbing to the 'ideology of domesticity', many women envisaged a role for themselves that combined marriage, motherhood and paid work.

Following an analysis of the responses to its survey, the NCW concluded that where mothers had good organising abilities, a supportive husband, only worked part-time when children were under three and were able to secure suitable childcare, then 'the children did not appear to suffer' if their mothers went out to work. However it identified two key issues as requiring further attention. These were: 'the need for planned supervision of school children after school hours and most particularly during the school holidays, and the manner in which the actual working hours of the mother can be detrimental to the family, rather than the mere fact that she goes out to work'.⁶³ The NCW used this report to highlight the lack of state support for working mothers. The survey revealed how working wives and mothers had to sort out their own childcare arrangements in the absence of good affordable childcare provided by local authorities. In response to the survey, the NCW called on both the state and employers to do more to assist working mothers by providing adequate childcare and allowing mothers to work flexibly to facilitate their responsibilities at home and work.⁶⁴

In June 1958 the NCW held a conference in London on the theme of 'the employment of women with children'. At the opening session conference organisers explained they were holding the conference because the NCW was an organisation of women 'deeply concerned with the paramount importance of protecting the home and family unit'. In light of this commitment and because increasing numbers of mothers were going out to work, the NCW felt 'if the home was to be preserved, it was of upmost importance that the problems involved [of mothers working] should be recognised and faced'.⁶⁵ Although the findings of the NCW survey and other investigations had shown that the children of working mothers were not more likely to become juvenile delinquents, the conference acknowledged that 'much uneasiness was felt by certain sections of the public...in regard to the care of children'.⁶⁶

⁶² *Women in Council*, 28 (April 1957): 68. See also Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 195-199.

⁶³ *Women in Council*, 28 (April 1957): 69.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁵ *Women in Council*, 30 (September 1958): 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

The NCW identified children aged between five and eleven years as being the most problematic with regards to childcare. In order to allow mothers to drop their children at school and then be available to collect them after school the NCW called on employers to introduce shift patterns corresponding with local school hours. It told the conference that 'it would seem a moral obligation on industry to endeavour to meet this problem'.⁶⁷ The City of Liverpool was held up as a pioneer in the area of childcare having set up centres for children after school hours and holiday play schemes for up to 4,000 children. How to care for children during the school holidays was a perennial problem and the conference was told that employer sponsored holiday camps, local authority play schemes and adventure playgrounds were all ways to overcome this difficulty. Other obstacles faced by mothers wishing to engage in paid work included the issue of employers having to pay full-time insurance contributions for part-time workers and the limits on widow's earnings, which could lead to a reduction in their widow's pension. Following the conference a report was sent to the Minister of Labour, who had personally endorsed the event, on these matters. In his reply the NCW was assured that the relevant departments would consider their concerns.⁶⁸

All the discussions taking place during this one-day conference assumed that married mothers did want to work outside the home and so the question was how to support them in caring for their children. It is significant, however, that there was little if no mention of the role of fathers in childcare. The view prevailed that when parents took decisions about the mother working it was she, and not her husband who had to find a solution to combining work with domestic responsibilities. The father's status as a full-time worker was never in doubt. Other housewives' organisations shared this assumption. The WI expressed concern in the late 1950s about how working mothers could ensure that their decision to work would not have a negative on family life. *Home and Country*, the WI journal, told readers that modern women had the right to find fulfilment in paid work, but when doing this they also had to ensure their children were well cared for.⁶⁹ The WI envisaged a role for itself in lobbying government and employers to provide greater assistance to working mothers. Ideas put forward included 'married women' jobs where women worked only during school hours and employers agreeing to allow mothers time off when children were ill.

The TG also accepted that mothers would work and in 1963 told members that 'some may disapprove of working mothers but it is going to happen so we need to plan for it'.⁷⁰ Like the NCW and WI, they focussed on how mothers could adapt to combining work and childcare responsibilities and argued that the state needed to provide more funding for day nurseries, summer camps and after school care. Of the four housewives' associations discussed here, the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁸ London Metropolitan Archive (LMA), ACC/3613/01/23, NCW Archive, Executive Committee Minutes (Committee of Management), 20 June 1958.

⁶⁹ *Home and Country*, 39 (September 1957): 269. See also Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 195-199.

⁷⁰ *The Townswoman*, 30 (September 1963): 243.

MU was perhaps the one most concerned about the impact of working mothers on family life. The Union adamantly maintained that mothers with young children should not work full-time and should avoid paid work altogether when their children were under the age of five. The MU also appears to have been reluctant to encourage the expansion of after school care. In 1958 it requested dissociation from a NCW resolution calling on the government to provide increased provision of after school clubs and holiday schemes for children.⁷¹

Despite the concerns housewives' associations had about mothers working, they all recognised that women, including wives and mothers, had a contribution to make to the workforce. This was particularly so in the case of professional women, and they encouraged these women to consider a return to work once their children were older. The NCW noted in June 1958 that

the raising of a family may certainly necessitate a break in most employments; but after the family has been reared a woman can look forward to many of the best years of her life which could be employed in highly skilled and responsible occupations.⁷²

The MU also accepted that older professional women, for example teachers, should consider returning to work and supported a 1964 call by the Ministry of Labour for female teachers to re-join the profession.⁷³ Similarly the TG firmly believed that middle-class, well educated women had a duty to return to the workplace once their children were older and bemoaned the fact that these women were given little encouragement by employers who often offered them 'work far below their capacity'.⁷⁴

The engagement of housewives' associations in debates about working mothers and their acceptance, with certain provisos, that maternal employment did not endanger traditional family life is significant. For mainstream and conservative women's groups to envisage a role in society for women incorporating marriage, motherhood and paid work undermines Friedan's thesis that women in the 1950s acquiesced to the 'feminine mystique'. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that housewives' organisations in Britain not only sought ways in which to support their members as wives, mothers and workers but also called upon women to get involved in public life as active citizens. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the MU, WI, TG and NCW all campaigned on a wide range of issues with the aim of improving women's lives, safeguarding family life and enhancing the status of women in contemporary society.

As I have written elsewhere, these associations were active in various campaigns throughout the years 1928 to 1964 and, as housewives and mothers, were effective and successful in having

⁷¹ LMA, ACC/3613/3/024, NCW Archive, Executive Committee Minutes, 21 November 1958.

⁷² LMA, ACC/3613/01/23, NCW Archive, Executive Committee Minutes (Committee of Management), 12 April 1957.

⁷³ Lambeth Palace Library (LPL), MU/WAT/9/2, MU Archive, *Mothers' Union News* (July 1964).

⁷⁴ Cited in Caroline Merz, *After the Vote: The Story of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds in the Year of its Diamond Jubilee 1929-1989* (Norwich: National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, 1988), 46.

their voices heard in public life.⁷⁵ Unlike Friedan, who suggested that domesticity limited women's participation in life outside the home, British housewives' organisations argued that it was because of women's experience of domesticity that they were qualified to speak out on issues affecting their own lives and the lives of their families. In 1961, members of the TG were reminded of this when they were told of 'the good that can accrue to the population as a whole when a large body of women, after informed debate, act in unison and make their composite voice heard in the land'.⁷⁶

The yearly reports of activities undertaken by the WI, TG, NCW and MU during the 1950s and early 1960s make it clear that these groups undertook many campaigns. This work illustrates their ability, as housewives, to make a significant contribution to political life in these years. Issues of concern included the economic position of women as wives, mothers and workers, the delivery of state welfare to women, access to good housing, healthcare services including free birth control information and legal abortion. These organisations were also interested in issues affecting their communities and the nation. As a result, topics such as air pollution, road safety, anti-litter campaigns, nuclear weapons testing and the treatment of women and children within the criminal justice system were all tabled as resolutions at annual general meetings, with action taken to lobby government and relevant bodies.

Not only were housewives' organisations active in calling for reform on such a wide range of policy, they successfully contributed to legislative change. On the issue of widow's allowances, for example, the WI, NCW, TG and MU worked together to bring pressure on government to increase the earnings limit for widowed mothers. As part of this campaign, which continued throughout the 1950s, the NCW presented evidence demonstrating the high levels of poverty amongst this group of women and their children. Following a campaign that included letters to the press and Members of Parliament, deputations to Parliament and well publicised meetings, the government announced in 1964 that the earnings limit for widowed mothers would be raised from £5 to £7 per week.⁷⁷ Housewives' associations expressed their satisfaction with this reform, but the MU commented it would like 'the earnings limit to be abolished'.⁷⁸

Success was also forthcoming with regards to the issue of screening for cervical cancer. In 1964, the WI and TG both passed resolutions calling for a comprehensive programme for routine smear tests for cervical cancer. This issue was seen as particularly important for housewives as at the time it was thought that older women who had children were most at risk of developing this form of cancer. As with other resolutions, they sent letters to the relevant authorities and when later in 1964 the National Health Service introduced this service in England, members of housewives' organisations actively encouraged take up of screening. In addition to these two

⁷⁵ See Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens* and 'Housewives, Workers and Citizens'.

⁷⁶ *National Union of Townswomen's Guilds Annual Report*, 1961, 4.

⁷⁷ See Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 204-206.

⁷⁸ LPL, MU/WAT.9/2, MU Archive, *Mothers' Union News*, 'Watch News' (January 1964), 12.

success stories, housewives' associations were vocal on other key issues during these years, for example the welfare of divorced wives, the rights of parents to visit their children in hospital and on-going debates about the need for high quality and affordable childcare.⁷⁹

This study of housewives' associations in Britain in the postwar years demonstrates that the perils of the feminine mystique, as set out by Friedan, had been identified by the TG, WI, MU and NCW long before publication of her ground-breaking text in 1963. Through all of their activities, these groups sought tirelessly to demonstrate that domesticity did not have to result in women being isolated in their own homes, concerned only with the welfare of their husbands and children. These groups firmly rejected this 'old-fashioned' version of domesticity where the ultimate goal was to have a husband who 'thinks you're wonderful'. Instead housewives' organisations envisaged their role as facilitators in encouraging women to participate fully in local and national life. In doing so they accepted that increasing numbers of women would want to work and did all they could to support women as wives, mothers and workers.

This was a much more modern interpretation of domesticity for women in the postwar years and one which presents some interesting challenges to Friedan's legacy. Rather than losing themselves to the ideology of domesticity, housewives' associations played a key part in constructing a new kind of domesticity for the postwar world. In this alternative to 'Mrs. 1963', women could be wives and mothers but also workers, active citizens and political actors. Women may have struggled to adapt to all of these roles. Some women may have opted for full-time domesticity, whilst others chose to combine work, motherhood and involvement in public life. What is key, however, is that this more nuanced representation of women's lives is far closer to reality than the world described by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. As a result the myth of 'the happy housewife' and the image of the 'perfect wife' should no longer dominate histories of women in the years after the Second World War.

⁷⁹ See Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 200-210.