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Changes In Newspaper Portrayals Of Women, 1900-1960

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CHANGES IN NEWSPAPER PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN, 1900-1960

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

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The Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will show how mainstream newspapers depicted women in the first half of the twentieth century, and how these portrayals changed alongside society's view of women during this time. In addition, it will look at how coverage of women and the transformations occurring during these fifty years may have influenced and affected each other, as well as how media treatment of women contributed to the beginnings of the second wave of feminism that started in the second half of the century.

Keywords: Newspapers, Women, Portrayal of Women, Women and the Media, Twentieth Century

Dedicated to my family and friends;
sometimes you believe in me more than I believe in myself

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century was an era of great social change for women in America, with their roles changing dramatically during that time. In the first fifty years of the century, women gained the right to vote and gradually moved from the home to the workplace, sowing the seeds for second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s, when they would fight for equal treatment and reproductive rights. In this thesis, I intend to show how newspapers portrayed women and their “appropriate” roles leading up to the revolutionary 1960s and 1970s, and whether the depictions of women in prominent newspapers evolved alongside the changes females were actually experiencing. In addition, I will look at how coverage of women and the transformations occurring during these fifty years may have influenced and affected each other.

I chose to focus on mainstream American newspapers that were already well-established by 1900 and that continued to have an impact throughout the twentieth century. Specifically, I picked four newspapers from four distinct areas of the country in order to give the most well-rounded coverage possible of how women were portrayed in the media during this time period. The four newspapers are: the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* (the *Chicago Daily Tribune* at the beginning of the twentieth century) and *The Washington Post*. Although these newspapers are diverse

geographically, I soon discovered they were not diverse content-wise, as they usually presented similar topics and stories.

I have broken down my research and analysis into one chapter for each decade from 1900 to 1940, with the fifth chapter covering 1940 to 1960. Each chapter surveys the historical context for women during that time in America, discusses how newspapers depicted women in those decades using specific examples of articles from the four newspapers, and shows how that portrayal related to society's views and expectations of women at the time.

CHAPTER 2

1900-1909

At the turn of the twentieth century, the ideal woman was considered to be a “champion of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” a continuation of the Victorian era values prevalent during the nineteenth century.¹ Major newspapers at the time reinforced the expectation that women be devoted and obedient to the males in their lives as well as to maintain the house and look after their children. If they had any free time, they were to devote it to philanthropic efforts, often through civic clubs for women; in no way were they to enter the public sphere of work, business, or politics if they wished to maintain middle-class respectability.²

Yet this idealized portrayal of women ignored a growing number of women who were entering the workforce during this time. In 1900, 20 percent of wage earners in America were women, a number that would grow to 25 percent by the end of the decade.³ The most common employment for women was as domestic servants (including maids, cooks, nurses, laundresses, etc.), with positions as factory workers being the second most common.⁴

At the start of the century, high school diplomas were rare, as only six percent of 17-year-olds graduated from high school.⁵ Yet many more women achieved this than men. In 1900, 60 percent of high school diplomas were earned by women, a trend that

would not even out until the 1960s.⁶ Men were less likely to graduate from high school, because many of them entered the labor force during their teens. But though fewer men earned high school diplomas than women, college was still mostly reserved for men, as 80 percent of college graduates in 1900 were male.⁷ Still, only 2 percent of the population had a college degree, so among the general population, women were likely to be more educated than men.⁸

However, looking at major newspapers of the day, readers would never know that there was such a significant number of women who were high-school educated or in the workforce, as women were not well represented in the papers, either in terms of staff or content. By 1900, little more than two percent of reporters were female, and those that were there were not allowed to write “real news;” they were segregated and expected to write for women’s pages, which usually contained columns and articles about homemaking issues and women’s social roles, such as news about fashion and the socialite scene.⁹ In other words, only a limited and idealized representation of women was depicted in the papers.

There are a plethora of examples of this in the four newspapers at the focus of this research. Numerous columns from these papers in the first decade of the century are aimed at housewives to give them advice on tasks in the home and mistakes to avoid. For example, the *New York Times* column “Women Here and There—Their Frills and Fancies” presented stories and situations that had supposedly really happened, quoting conversations and experts.¹⁰ In the column, one such expert “recommends sewing as quieting to the nerves and a real benefit.” Another woman declares her support of

women's suffrage, but a man speaks out against her, saying "Suffrage will not make the woman a bit less feckless and unthinking."

The column went on to be an advertisement of sorts, promoting the latest fashion and jewelry and telling women what to buy and not buy. This section was full of statements such as "The up-to-date girl now has her finger purse carved with her initials instead of having her monogram in brass or silver," and "Flannels are being worn less and less each year," as it would "drag around the figure in a way which makes the prettiest woman look a fright."¹¹

A similar column in the *Los Angeles Times*, "The Times' Answers by Experts," gave advice to girls and women about such topics as preparing for marriage ("Whatever her husband may do, she should avoid criticising him to others—unless she has quite made up her mind to leave him"), laundry and housework, and the value of hobbies ("Marriage...is a woman's whole existence," so "She is a very fortunate woman if she has...some hobby...which will give her something to think of besides herself and her husband—or rather herself in relation to him").¹²

Other columns targeted at women include "Women in Their Clubs"¹³ and "Society and Home and Abroad"¹⁴ which listed the news and happenings of women's clubs and events, such as teas and debutante balls from organizations like the Daughters of the Revolution and The Barnard Club.

One column in the *Los Angeles Times* gave advice to husbands on how to deal with their wives. In it, a husband complained that his wife had been influenced by her mother-in-law to become a vegetarian and refused to cook meat for him anymore. The

column states that the husband has “a perfect right” to eject her.¹⁵ This shows that a husband had authority and power over his wife, and the press reinforced this view.

Advertisements also specifically targeted housewives, such as one in the *New York Times* for Royal Baking Powder that stated “Every housewife knows she can rely upon it,” because she would “never experiment with so important an article as human food.”¹⁶

When women were mentioned in more traditional news stories rather than columns targeted towards them, it was still very clear their duties remained in the home as a mother, wife, and daughter. For instance, a feature about a woman who helped run an insurance company stated that “women want to consider their own financial problems” and not be advised by a man.¹⁷ Yet the story was also quick to show that the businesswoman was happily married and keeps house. She said, “I think that no woman can be a woman’s woman...unless she is sufficiently feminine to love the companionship of men and who can love ideally, purely, worshipfully....the loveless woman is to me an anomaly.” She also explained that “It gives me infinite pleasure” to plan social events at home and choose menu items. This shows that even the women who did have careers were still expected to adhere to the traditional role of women, which newspapers of the day encouraged.

In addition, it’s made clear that career women were to be the exception to remaining in the home, as motherhood was to be the primary duty of a woman, according to a 1905 address given by President Theodore Roosevelt and reported by the *New York Times*.¹⁸ He said in the story, “There are certain old truths which will be true as long as this world endures, and which no amount of progress can alter. One of these truths is that

the primary duty of the husband is to be...the breadwinner for his wife and children, and that the primary duty of the woman is to be the helpmeet, the housewife, and mother.”

Mrs. Roosevelt, too, supported this line of thinking with her actions. According to a *Los Angeles Times* article, a suffragette asked the first lady if she would support the cause, saying, “She could do so much with her position and yet she doesn’t stand for anything!”¹⁹ Mrs. Roosevelt replied, “I really think it’s a great deal finer thing to have a husband or a brother or a son act on your advice than to do the thing yourself.” Thus, the first lady, one of the most visible women in America at the time, supported the duties of women as wives and mothers, as promoted in the press.

Women who worked as servants or did not marry were seen by society as less honorable than those who followed the established norm, and newspapers reinforced this view. For example, one *New York Times* story compared English and American maids, and concluded that the stigma of being a maid was similar in both countries, that “it is less honorable to peel a potato than to run a sewing machine.”²⁰ And a *Washington Post* headline claimed that “No woman [is] great to her maid,”²¹ meaning that society and the press deemed it acceptable for women who had maids to treat them like the less honorable women that they were.

Unmarried women, or old maids as they were called, were also looked down upon. In her letter to the editor of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, a single woman stated that old maids were being attacked in the press. She defended them, saying that there were many unmarried women who had achieved distinction in the arts and that “modern social conditions favor these unfortunate ones.”²²

Another aspect of journalism involved coverage of the women's suffrage movement. By 1900, women had been seeking the right to vote for about fifty years, yet mainstream papers "were not interested in women's suffrage" at the turn of the century, and "stories of suffrage meetings were either discarded or boiled down to a sentence unless there was promise of fights."²³

In the first decade of the twentieth century, suffragettes in England were acquiring a reputation for making militant displays such as protests, which resulted in jail sentences and hunger strikes.²⁴ Many of these English suffragettes were visiting the U.S. at this time, urging American suffragettes to make the same outspoken public displays.

The articles about suffragettes that did make the papers reported on the English women's suffrage movement or visits of English suffragettes to America. For example, a *Los Angeles Times* story declared that suffragettes in London "have no respect for men or customs" because they "interrupt sittings in the House of Commons" and "fight with policemen," among causing other disruptions.²⁵ Other *Los Angeles Times* stories covered English suffragettes visiting Denver to take women to election polls,²⁶ profiled a key organizer of women's suffrage in England,²⁷ and expressed disbelief that "women's suffrage in England was actually in sight."²⁸

The only instance in which American suffragettes were considered newsworthy occurred when they were snubbed or barred entrance somewhere. For example, articles in *The Washington Post* mentioned President Theodore Roosevelt closing the gates to his Sagamore Hill home on suffragettes who sought to protest,²⁹ as well as Wall Street men snubbing suffragettes who tried to sell buttons and fans in the New York financial district.³⁰

Major newspapers across the country were of one mind about the suffrage movement: it wouldn't amount to much, and their coverage was very persuasive. The article about suffragettes marching on Sagamore Hill stated, "the conquering will have to be done some other day, for after all, suffragettes are only women, and when the rain began to drench pretty white skirts and uncurl the plumes of the merry suffragettes' hats, the game was called off on account of wet grounds."³¹ One headline in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* even proclaimed, "English doctor says suffragettes suffer from ancient form of insanity."³²

Clearly, newspapers in the first decade of the twentieth century discounted the importance of women, repeatedly emphasizing in articles and columns that their duties should be as housewives and mothers, and encouraging them to make themselves better in those roles. This reinforced Victorian social standards of the time. Little did they know how much would change for women in the decades to come.

CHAPTER 3

1910-1919

At the beginning of the 1910s, newspapers continued their depictions of women in traditional roles, but with a growing emphasis on being thrifty and less indulgent. This emphasis peaked by the end of the decade, as the country had entered World War I and women were expected to embody a self-sacrificing devotion to the nation, as committed guardians of the home.³³ Also by the end of the decade, newspapers could no longer ignore the American women's suffrage movement, as suffragettes had stepped up their game to get on the nation's agenda by staging elaborate suffrage parades and recruiting wives of prominent men to their cause.³⁴

While the suffragettes' cause was now getting newspaper coverage, there was also plenty of backlash that tried to keep them from gaining momentum and being taken seriously. For instance, a *New York Times* article told of four "Housekeeping Centres" where young women live and receive daily instruction about how to be future wives and mothers, such as how to cook and do household chores.³⁵ The story acknowledged that the crusade is a call toward "old-fashioned womanhood" at a time when "suffragists and anti-suffragists are preparing for a battle." This shows that society was trying to counter the women's suffrage movement, and that newspapers gave credence to the backlash.

Another way newspapers promoted such "old-fashioned womanhood" was to have an old-fashioned woman speak out, which is what the *New York Times* did in an

interview with Mrs. Amelia Barr, 78:

“It is true that I do not altogether like the American girl of to-day...the greatest fault of all—and the one in measure accounting for all others—is her utter lack of reverence for any one or anything....The girl who rides astride, the girl who smokes cigarettes, and the girl who carries athletics to such an extreme that she has to be taken to the hospital—these are the types that I criticize most severely....I believe when the redundancies are cleared away, when she is sobered by matrimony, and the experiences of motherhood she will become quite a different creature.”³⁶

Columns and advertisements targeted toward women conveyed the same attitude as ever about women in their traditional role. The *Los Angeles Times* published a regular column titled “School for Housewives” in which writer Marion Harland discussed topics such as disciplining children³⁷ and packing an adequate lunch for husbands to take with them to work³⁸. Harland also ran an advice column called “The Housemothers’ Exchange,” where women wrote in to offer or request recipes and household suggestions for helping with problems such as bunions, sprains, and constipation.³⁹

Marion Harland was the pen name for Mary Terhune, who in addition to writing for women’s pages and women’s magazines, published 25 books about homemaking and domestic advice.⁴⁰ She believed women should “uncomplainingly shoulder their household duties,” and that even if a woman felt compelled to work in other pursuits, she should do it in addition to her household duties, as others may contribute to the workforce, but “nobody else in all the universe can mother your boy, or be your girl’s guide and best friend.”

In the *New York Times*, columns such as “What Every Woman Wants To Know” gave “stunning new ideas” about fashion and what food to serve.⁴¹ An advertisement urged women to “Make Your Purchases By Telephone,” as it “provides a means for the busy housewife to do her shopping easily and conveniently” and “leaves *much more time* to be devoted to household duties and to pleasures.”⁴² The ad proclaimed that a wife of a prominent lawyer does so and asked “Do You buy by Telephone?” These newspaper advertisements implied that to be a dutiful wife, a woman needed to shop by telephone, therefore showing another way the media was reinforcing society’s role for women.

The recurring message for women during this decade turned from society and fashion to thrift and productivity. One *Los Angeles Times* headline declared “Idle Women Are Parasites” and “Housewife Today Left With Much Leisure.”⁴³ In the article, a millionaire’s wife is quoted as saying, “I call myself a parasite. Any woman who lives off the wealth of her husband and does nothing for society is a parasite....Take for instance, the woman of moderate means, who plays away her afternoon at bridge or at similar pastimes, which benefit no one.” Similar articles in the *New York Times* stated that “American women indulge in too many luxuries”,⁴⁴ and that “High prices of food are due...to the extravagance of American women.”⁴⁵ News articles also told women how to be thrifty by using cold-storage for produce and eggs⁴⁶ and emphasized that food without fancy packages was much cheaper while containing the same product.⁴⁷

This call for women to be productive and do something worthwhile with their time was best epitomized once America entered World War I in 1917. During this time, women were expected to do their part in the war effort to express their patriotism. This included becoming nurses, clerks, and telephone operators for the military, as well as to

function as moral beacons and devoted icons of strength and sacrifice on the homefront.⁴⁸

Women also took on work in munitions factories assembling explosives, armaments, and railway, automobile, and airplane parts, in addition to working in oil refineries and steel foundries.⁴⁹ However, these jobs were held by lower-class women who had worked in blue-collar occupations even before the war, so reporters often overlooked them in favor of glorifying women who were nurses or volunteers.⁵⁰

The Washington Post published stories about women being called into war work at this time, with headlines such as “How Washington Women Can Fight For Their Country,”⁵¹ “Need More Women In War Work Here,”⁵² and “Calls Every Woman Of Nation Into War.”⁵³ The first of these articles explained that “every woman [is a] potential heroine” and that the war offered a “great opportunity” for housewives to get involved in the effort. Yet, it also pointed out that “There is not perhaps the same glory in working a ten-hour day in a munitions factory that attaches to duty in a military hospital.” Another article reported President Hoover’s plan for women to become members of the food administration and urged them to sign a pledge to conserve food.⁵⁴

Women’s suffrage also made strides at the end of the decade, and newspapers at the time reflected this. A *Washington Post* article showed suffragettes pledging the service of more than two million women if the country went to war, and quotes suffragette Carrie Chapman Catt as saying, “It behooves the women of this great country to bestir themselves in an effort to stem the tide which will cause untold misery to their men and even more, to themselves.”⁵⁵ Yet in the same article, Anna Howard Shaw made an appeal that in this crisis, the time is ripe for taking action on women’s suffrage, as women have “suffered equally with the men in times of international trouble, and bore an

equal burden in times of peace.” Another article reported suffragettes were declaring that their “inability to vote is crippling the war service of women.”⁵⁶

Suffragettes continued to use wartime to push their agenda in Washington, and by the end of 1919, they were poised to finally gain women’s suffrage. After largely ignoring the activities of suffragettes and not taking them seriously for the last decade, newspapers finally took note when their amendment arrived in Congress. It became the nineteenth amendment and granted women the right to vote. *The Washington Post* reported that President Wilson threw his support behind the amendment, although to him it was a matter of “policy not principle.”⁵⁷ And the *New York Times* reported the amendment passing in the House⁵⁸ and the Senate,⁵⁹ so that by 1919, all it needed was ratification by the states.

Contrasted with ten years earlier, when papers had ridiculed suffragettes who left a protest because the rain was drenching their pretty clothes,⁶⁰ in 1918, the *New York Times* published a series educating “the newly enfranchised women of New York” (some states passed women’s suffrage before it was passed in Congress nationwide) so they would be empowered and informed about politics.⁶¹ This turnaround in coverage from the suppression to the empowerment of women illustrates the great gains females made in the second decade of the twentieth century, both in the suffrage movement and in the workforce. However, this was certainly not the end of women’s struggles in society or newspaper coverage, as will be evident in records from subsequent decades.

CHAPTER 4

1920-1929

Women seemed destined to make an impact on public life during the 1920s, with the ratification of the nineteenth amendment that granted women's suffrage on August 26, 1920, and with the creation of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor the same year, which fought for better conditions for women workers.⁶² However, although strides and changes were made, women remained unequal to men both in society and the media.

Although women's suffrage activists saw their cause as a means for women to take an equal political role in governing the states and nation, it became clear once their efforts were successful that others did not want them to push their feminist agenda of achieving equality. Many political men thought women should use their new right to "better protect the home and demonstrate their patriotism" by supporting causes that women traditionally care about, such as improving schools or expanding community services.⁶³ Women lost the fight to serve on juries, and the *New York Times* reported in a story about the court ruling that "the right to vote did not necessarily qualify a person as a juror."⁶⁴ Women also had a hard time being elected to national political positions, although some took on roles in city and state governments and made gains on issues such as education and labor reforms, governmental efficiency, and municipal improvements.⁶⁵

Although few women were entering the political arena, they were becoming more

important factors in campaigns and elections, something of which newspapers took note. For example, a New York Times headline declared, “Women Loom Large in Nation’s Politics,” and the accompanying article went on to explain that many candidates have women’s campaign organizations set up alongside the men’s.⁶⁶ Political candidates also began targeting women voters, most notably Warren Harding, who spoke out for equal pay for equal work, maternity and infant protection and an end to child labor, in the hopes that he would appeal to women voters.⁶⁷ Women cast one third of the ballots in the 1920 presidential election, which Harding won. The *New York Times* quoted another presidential hopeful, Leonard Wood, who declared, “Women can be a tremendous influence in politics. They can bring a harmonizing element into our government, they can benefit the conditions of the laboring class and they can work for child welfare and public and private morality.”⁶⁸ This reinforced the belief that gaining women’s suffrage was a way to morally benefit society and make sociopolitical progress, rather than an issue of gender equality.

Many women who had worked in heavy industry jobs during the war were forced out once the men returned, yet many women were able to be active in public life, making their way into traditionally “male” professions or devoting themselves to social work and reform. In the 1920s, about 25 percent of women held jobs, and with the economy becoming more service-based, many were shifting away from domestic and factory jobs in favor of becoming secretaries, file clerks, waitresses, hairdressers and saleswomen.⁶⁹ Women were paid less than men, given less responsible jobs, relegated to different areas of the office, and hardly ever promoted to positions higher than clerical work. The number of women professional workers was at 14.2 percent by the end of the decade, and

most were nurses and teachers, as colleges limited or sometimes barred women from becoming doctors, lawyers, business executives, scientists, architects, and engineers.⁷⁰

After the war, once it was no longer necessary for women to be in the workforce, society wanted women to revert to traditional roles, and newspapers followed suit. They no longer published articles urging women to go to work, and returned to their traditional coverage of society news and women's clubs, to ensure that the freedoms women enjoyed during the war didn't become permanent. Newspapers published articles about how to be an economical housewife, almost completely ignoring the fact that many women held jobs. One *Chicago Daily Tribune* article reported that a male doctor said, "housewives are growing lazy," and that appliances such as vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, and washing machines were "turning mother into an engineer instead of a housewife."⁷¹ A couple of years later, a headline proclaimed that "A Clever Machine Can Be a Housekeeper, But It Takes a Woman with Heart and Understanding to Be a Homemaker."⁷² In the article, Doris Blake wrote that the difference is like that "between a furniture house's exhibition rooms and an apartment lived in for years....the housekeeper...puts house before occupants and the homemaker puts happiness of the occupants first." She later explained that housekeeping is a science, but homemaking is an art.

A column by Dorothy Dix in the *Los Angeles Times* did indicate that women could work outside the home, saying some people had complained "the home is a vanishing institution because girls are going into offices instead of the kitchen."⁷³ Dix asserted that "every girl should have had five years' experience in business life before she gets married." As the column went on, she made it clear that this wasn't for the woman's

personal benefit, however, but so that she might be a better wife and mother once she's married:

“The woman who has been in business makes a better wife than a purely domestic woman because she has had to submit to discipline and...having worked side by side with men, she understands them better and is better fitted to sympathize with them. She knows from experience how hard everything is earned, and she does not waste her husband's money....She knows the awful nerve-wearing strain of business that leaves a man a wreck at the end of the day, and so when her husband comes home, too tired to talk, utterly done up in mind and body, she doesn't feel herself ill-used because he isn't bright, and gay, and chatty. Instead, she feeds him and fusses over him, and coddles him like a sick baby until he gets himself together again.

“The woman who has had a few years' business experience makes a better mother than the woman who has never earned her own bread and butter, because she knows the world in which her children must live, and how to prepare them to meet its need. The woman who has always lived safe in the shelter of her home is as helpless to guide her children after infancy as a landsman would be to pilot a ship across a tempestuous sea.....she is powerless to help them.”⁷⁴

Another change during the 1920s was that traditional Victorian ideals about sex and women's roles were beginning to seem old-fashioned. Many young women moved to their own apartments in New York City, seeking to live independently, having love affairs and stimulating careers while avoiding marriage, which they saw as a trap their mothers had fallen into.⁷⁵ Even though women were still not supposed to be sexually

available until after marriage, it was now acceptable for women to show their sexuality through their dress as well as make themselves look sexy and available to potential husbands.

Media everywhere helped create the image for this new ideal of female beauty. Movies, magazines, and daily newspapers across the country featured images of sexy, young, beautiful women who were now the ideal.⁷⁶ Women who followed this new sexy style were called flappers, and they wore their hair in a short bob and threw out their corsets for more comfortable clothes like short skirts and dresses that left their arms bare. Yet this sexual revolution wasn't really freeing women; they were still expected to conform, but now they had to be sexy rather than pure.⁷⁷ Newspapers shifted their portrayal of women from a moral force embodying motherhood to this newly eroticized image of femininity, with pictures of women showing off the latest styles and columns explaining the latest fashions.⁷⁸ There were still articles dealing with creating the proper home, but the content had shifted to giving more attention to clothing, the body and getting pleasure from the husband's pleasure, both sexually and professionally.⁷⁹

Newspapers devoted coverage to flappers, including positive and negative portrayals. A *Chicago Daily Tribune* story showed that Nancy Astor, an American-born woman who was a member of British parliament at the time, supported the freedoms exercised by flappers:

“I realize that she has more freedom than she had in my day, but so has her mother, and her grandmother. I may be amazed at the sight of short hair and short skirts, but surely these are far healthier than long skirts and tight waists and curl papers and all the other paraphernalia that we women have had to put up with for

years....I don't believe the modern girl is any less virtuous than her grandmother, although she may be more venturesome.”⁸⁰

A column in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* by Doris Blake addressed a recent poll of the day which found most men prefer “the home girl” to the “flapper type.” Blake questioned what distinguishes one from the other, and asked “what accomplishments has the so-called home girl over the other one?”⁸¹ She believes flappers were “just as apt to flap right over into agreeable domesticity as she is to keep on flapping about,” and that “given the right man and a square deal, she will come through all right.” In this way, one “can’t tell a home girl from a flapper,” and it was just luck as to which kind a man will end up with, she wrote.

Another change in newspaper coverage after women’s suffrage and World War I was that now there were more female reporters at mainstream newspapers than ever before, and they were no longer always relegated to society sections.⁸² However, although a few were integrated into the city newsrooms and onto the front page, the majority were still expected to write for a female audience and from a woman’s perspective.⁸³ Even though newspapers were slow to incorporate female reporters into their main news stories, there were other media outlets that allowed more women to report and look into more investigative topics, such as magazines and alternative newspapers.

For example, Vera Connelly (who would later go on to found *Woman’s Day* magazine) wrote a series of stories for *Good Housekeeping* that exposed the cruel conditions at schools on Indian reservations, as well as pieces about juvenile crime and working women.⁸⁴ Connelly had written for the *New York Sun* in 1917 before finding a

niche with magazines, which allowed her to write the kind of investigative stories she wanted.

Another female reporter, Anna Steese Richardson, wrote in the *New York Times* how she got better access to an event as a reporter for a women's magazine than did the female reporters for major daily newspapers.⁸⁵ She wrote that while covering the 1920 Republican National Convention in Chicago for "a home magazine with two million readers," she "sat among the women who had come to Chicago believing that they were about to help write a fresh page in American history. This privilege was denied women reporters for the great dailies, who were seated in the press boxes high above the masses of women."

Perhaps Richardson's experience was indicative of what many women experienced in the 1920s: they made gains in being taken seriously in public life, but if they tried to enter the public sector in a capacity equal to a male, they were most often shut down.

CHAPTER 5

1930-1939

As a result of women's sexual revolution in the 1920s, they began to have access to contraceptives during the decade that followed. This was due in large part to Margaret Sanger, who had fought for years to get the government to allow and favor birth control. In 1936, a federal court ruled that doctors could prescribe birth control.⁸⁶ Although contraceptives at that time were not ideal, "they did give women more control over their bodies than they had ever had before."

However, there was still some backlash against the gains women made in their sexuality, and Victorian standards and views made a comeback. Sigmund Freud, whose ideas about sex were considered to be the ultimate authority at the time, believed women were "anatomically inferior" to men and that they were envious of the male sexual organ.⁸⁷ Freud further thought the only way they could overcome this feeling of inferiority was to be devoted to their husbands and sons. Two Freudian psychologists published a book saying that the desire of a woman to be anything other than a wife and mother was "the desire for the impossible, a desire to be a man." By the end of the 1930s, Freudian thinking pervaded American culture, including books, movies, and the media.

Newspapers continued to publish articles praising housewives, including one in the New York Times which declared that American housewives were more efficient than

their European counterparts, by finishing their housework in an average of nine hours a day, or 63 hours a week, compared with more than 100 hours a week for women in many European countries.⁸⁸ The article's main argument was that American housewives were simply better at budgeting their time for housework, and went on to give tips on time management for housewives. This shows that a woman's household duties remained important enough to report about in the papers.

Still, there were some gains made for working women. One *New York Times* article covered an address given by Frances Perkins, the State Industrial Commissioner, in which she discussed women's growing role in industry: "While the industrial world was a 'man's world,'....Industry is adapting itself to the needs and interests of women workers."⁸⁹ The article quoted her as saying that this change "made the home less important in the life of women today."

Yet with so many women employed outside the home, a *New York Times* article wondered "Whether or not an employed woman can work all day and then go home and prepare an adequate and balanced dinner."⁹⁰ The article reported that a group was conducting a questionnaire which would ask working women about their meals in an effort to answer this "problem." This shows that society is more concerned with making sure employed women can maintain their household duties rather than addressing the fact that these women are essentially expected to work two jobs, one outside the home for lower pay than a man, and another once they returned home with no wages.

In addition to acknowledging more women workers, newspapers also showed that women were being targeted more as buyers. For instance, a *Los Angeles Times* article from 1931 reported that "women buy 85 percent of all the goods sold in the country,"

including 51 percent of cars (men had bought 90 percent of them a decade before), 80 percent of radios and electric appliances, and 51 percent of hardware store goods.⁹¹ Yet the article ended by saying “this is one reason why the newspaper that goes into the home is the best advertising medium,” ignoring the fact that many women were now working and not confined to the home.

During the Great Depression, jobs were scarce for everyone, as men and women in blue-collar and white-collar jobs lost their positions in droves. Still, more wives were working than ever before, with an increase from 11.7 percent to 15.2 percent during the Depression.⁹² Because the economy was in decline and men faced salary cuts or firing, their wives entered the workforce to help make ends meet. Yet because jobs were scarce, women workers were accused of stealing them from men, and faced job discrimination. This was especially true for college-educated women who sought jobs in professional spheres, at the same time that university deans were telling women at many colleges not to seek careers for which higher education had prepared them. But not all married women could work, because in 26 states, laws prohibited the employment of married women, and from 1932 to 1937, the federal government didn’t allow more than one family member to work in civil service.⁹³ This, of course, meant that the husband would be the one to get the job rather than the wife.

A *Los Angeles Times* article dealt with the bind women faced once a similar employment policy for the city government was proposed in 1934. The headline proclaimed that career wives were in a “cross-fire” over the issue, because a wife “shudders at the idea of her sons competing in a feminist world...but she likewise recoils from a retrogressive system which would fire women from positions in the business and

professional world which they have won through hard training and diligent service—just because they are married.”⁹⁴ The female reporter argued against such an amendment, saying that “No one warned that marriage was the end of her career” and “It would be preposterous to tell any man that he must renounce his life work because his wife is also earning.”

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president, his New Deal reforms helped the working class and revived the labor movement. Although women benefited from unions and protective labor legislation, which set standards for minimum wages and the number of hours one could work each day, such reforms were hard to enforce, and women continued to earn less than men in many cases.⁹⁵ However, middle class professional women had more success under the New Deal, and many were able to become involved in politics. Roosevelt made room for women in his administration, and many became advisers and administrators of his various social welfare programs.

Perhaps nobody stood for women making a place for themselves in public life more than First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. While in the White House, she maintained a career of her own by writing books and having regular newspaper columns and radio broadcasts.⁹⁶ She also held weekly press conferences at which she allowed only female reporters, believing this would allow her to discuss women’s issues more openly and provide jobs for women journalists. Eleanor Roosevelt showed she was more than just the president’s wife; she was also “a professional woman with activities and opinions of her own.”⁹⁷ She urged women to join her in public life, asserting that women should “disabuse their male competitors of the old idea that women are only ‘ladies in business.’”

Yet for the first few years she was First Lady, newspapers wrote about Eleanor Roosevelt in the same way they had written about other women: they described her clothing and demeanor rather than focusing on her remarks if she was giving a speech, or portrayed her as a compassionate nurse if she was doing charity work.⁹⁸ For instance, a *Washington Post* headline from early 1933 explained that Eleanor Roosevelt wore “evening clothes and white gloves” for a flight in Amelia Earhart’s plane.⁹⁹ However, as Eleanor Roosevelt solidified her independence and authoritative actions, many stories finally began focusing on her political views, social causes, and speeches without attention to her physical details.¹⁰⁰ For example, in an article from late 1934, the *Washington Post* reported that she would debate her political views the following day.¹⁰¹

Unmarried women, or old maids as they were called, also garnered a lot of newspaper attention during the 1930s. This was likely because now that so many women were employed and many married women weren’t allowed to work, people were revisiting the notion that unmarried women were less honorable than those that married. One headline from a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article by Doris Blake proclaimed that “Married Women’s Advantages Over ‘Old Maids’ Are Becoming Fewer.”¹⁰² The story explained that “being a spinster isn’t what it used to be” because “not marrying in these times does not need any more explanation than marriage does,” as unmarried women were usually earning their own money and were no longer dependent on relatives, as in the past. Dorothy Dix, herself unmarried, wrote in a *Los Angeles Times* column that “old maids” are “most useful citizens who deserve but get little praise.”¹⁰³ She even suggested that there should be a “national observance day for spinsters.”

CHAPTER 6

1940-1960

Just a decade after women were told not to steal jobs from men and many married women were barred from working, suddenly, women were told to get a job as soon as possible when the U.S. entered World War II in 1941. Just as in World War I, women were now expected to work, whether they were married or not. The Manpower Commission, a government agency, realized going to war meant that women would need to work on the homefront, and told industries to recruit and hire women, a campaign that reached the media.¹⁰⁴

More than six million women who hadn't worked in the past got jobs during the war, increasing the number of women in the workforce from 25 percent to 36 percent.¹⁰⁵ Some of these women became office workers in order to handle "the flow of paper created by the war," but the majority of them worked in places such as factories, manufacturing steel, airplanes, cars, or munitions plants. These jobs were traditionally held by men, as many of them involved tasks such as moving cranes, welding, riveting, and loading shells. Because women workers were in such high demand during the war, they had better working conditions and earned higher wages than in the past, as heavy industry work was worth twice the salary they had earned in the past in occupations like domestic workers, waitresses, and beauticians.

Newspapers ran more stories about women working for the war effort than they

had in World War I. For example, the Los Angeles Times reported that more than 15 million housewives faced a “shift to munitions plants”¹⁰⁶ and announced Red Cross classes that would train women in first aid.¹⁰⁷ The *Chicago Daily Tribune* was filled with profiles on women as steelmakers,¹⁰⁸ radio operators,¹⁰⁹ and makers of weaponry and parts for bombs.¹¹⁰ The stories included photographs of women working in the various jobs, something that wasn’t part of World War I coverage, so readers could actually see women working at these traditionally “male” jobs. Before the 1930s, professional photography required bulky equipment¹¹¹ and could not easily be sent by wire,¹¹² so newspapers contained few photographs until the mid-1930s, when equipment had been made more unobtrusive and photos could be sent quickly by wire.

While the war provided some opportunities for women reporters, it “did not clear the way for women in journalism.”¹¹³ Only 100 out of 1,600 war correspondents covering combat were women, and “they could only win overseas assignments by agreeing to cover the ‘women’s angle,’” so they weren’t allowed in press briefings or on the front lines. In the U.S., female journalists were also limited to writing stories about women or from a woman’s perspective, such as Kate Massee, who wrote most of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*’s articles about women workers during the war. Massee’s report about women working as steelmakers makes it clear that steelmaking is “traditionally a masculine function” and that “for the first time,” women “have become part of the combine of men and flame that has made steel by night and day for 35 years.”¹¹⁴ A husband of one of the female steelmakers, who was away at war, said in the story that “he’s real proud of her.” And Massee’s article about female radio operators reported how “they work right

alongside men operators.”¹¹⁵ These examples show that although working women were getting news coverage, those stories were relegated to female reporters. In the articles, women workers were shown in relation to men, and the female reporters emphasized that the women were entering a man’s world.

Some women even joined the military, the ultimate man’s world, as *The Washington Post* reported that D.C. women created a military training unit¹¹⁶ and that the naval reserve included 91,000 women.¹¹⁷ The *Post* also reported that “the Women’s Army Corps is now a permanent component of the regular military establishment,” something that was “unparalleled in the history of the world.”¹¹⁸

Something else new to this war was the creation of nurseries by the federal government, which the *Tribune* said women “have reason to be grateful for” because now women with young children could contribute to war work.¹¹⁹ For the first time, it was acceptable for women to be breadwinners rather than having housework and childrearing as their only purpose. Fashions were created to target the working woman, and the press reported that fact, such as a *New York Times* article which explained how a department store featured “new styles” that “cater to the career girl.”¹²⁰ This new attire included wool, crepe, and taffeta “business dresses” with suit jackets, an outfit that “can be simple or glamorous depending upon the type of jewelry and accessories worn with it.”

And whereas twenty years ago, the press showed time-saving household devices such as vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, and washing machines as a way for housewives to grow lazy become “an engineer instead of a housewife,”¹²¹ during the 1940s, newspapers reported that such appliances were a “big boon to homemakers”,¹²² and something that could “work magic in solving the housewife’s problems.”¹²³

But despite their new role at work, women were still expected to maintain their traditional roles and interests in the home. For instance, an article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that housewives sought materials such as elastic, nylon, and steel wool, which were scarce during the war, in order to make their household duties easier.¹²⁴ The story also listed names of housewives along with items they wanted, such as hair nets, shoes for their children, and an aluminum tea kettle, in the hope that someone would have what they were looking for and bring it to them. Other *Tribune* reports explained how housewives faced problems with beef supply¹²⁵ and were buying up canned foods before a freeze on rations.¹²⁶ Additional headlines proclaimed how women should be assured of “lovely things for Christmas”¹²⁷ as a reward for “the woman who works and waits,” as well as declared that “proper exercise will develop a proud and pretty carriage.”¹²⁸

Because women worked during World War II on a larger scale than during World War I, the backlash when the war ended was also greater. While it was convenient for the war effort for women to work, it didn’t change long-term attitudes about the roles of women. Almost overnight, women whose independence was respected and seen as patriotic by the media during the war were now seeing negative depictions of middle-class working women in the press.¹²⁹ This reinforced society’s view that the future of the nation depended on women leaving their jobs and returning home, or else they would be “ruining the lives of returning veterans and turning their children into delinquents.” The women who did continue to work had to accept low salaries and menial jobs because society and the press made them feel guilty about working at all.

For example, the *The New York Times* began publishing a plethora of society news¹³⁰ and columns with tips about homemaking.¹³¹ Though the paper reported in 1953

that a quarter of all wives held jobs outside the home,¹³² an article presented the theory that this was because “duties that once kept a housewife busy are done better and more quickly by mechanized gadgets.”¹³³ Another reported that the “difference between [a] working and non-working homemaker is...not so marked” and “greatly exaggerated.”¹³⁴ It was made clear that employed women were still responsible for the home as well, as *Los Angeles Times* headlines proclaimed “How to Do Your Housework After a Day at the Office”¹³⁵ and that the working woman’s “Need for Efficiency Increases.”¹³⁶

Yet newspaper reports also showed that women were beginning to sow the seeds of their fight for better wages and treatment. For example, a story in the *Los Angeles Times* featured a state welfare commission’s debate on a pay hike for women,¹³⁷ while another reported on working mothers who sought a tax break for childcare expenses.¹³⁸

Thus, in just a few years, newspapers had presented two extremes: one an image of women who could be self-sufficient, competent, and valued in the workforce, and the other of women whose main role was “to be the wife of a man with those attributes.”¹³⁹ These conflicting news messages frustrated women trying to be taken seriously in the workplace, and paved the way for the modern women’s movement of the 1960s, when women began fighting against the many roles they were expected to take on, in order to end discrimination and achieve equality in the workplace, a movement that continues to this day.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: 1960s AND BEYOND

In the first half of the twentieth century, women made advances in society and the press by gaining suffrage and moving into the workplace during wartime. However, few of these social and economic changes had a lasting effect, as it was only acceptable for women to be in the workplace when it was convenient, and by the 1950s, it seemed like everything might revert to traditional ideals once again. However, women had experienced a taste of what it could be like to be in the public sphere, leading to the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 70s that would finally put them on the path toward permanent change.

The contradictions in women's lives led them to fight for equal treatment and wages in the workplace as well as reproductive rights, among other issues. Women reporters "were caught in a bind" in the 1960s, as they were grateful for the opportunities that covering women's news gave them, but they were frustrated because they were mostly excluded from covering important news such as politics, sports, and science.¹⁴⁰ The number of women working in the print news industry had grown to 37 percent by 1960, and they began to fight to get paid the same as male journalists as well as get the women's pages removed. They wanted news about women's issues to "be integrated into all areas of the newspaper" and explained to their male editors that society pages diminished women and excluded them from the rest of the paper. During the 1960s,

many papers finally abandoned the society pages and women's news, choosing instead to publish a feature and human-interest section.¹⁴¹

Though women in society and female journalists struggled for the rest of the twentieth century and beyond to be taken seriously in the workplace, hold high ranking jobs, and earn wages equal to men, the discrepancies in the first half of the century set their fight and their success in motion.

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Conclusion

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