

The Feminine Mystique is the title of a book written by Betty Friedan who also founded The National Organization for Women (NOW) to help US women gain equal rights. She describes the "feminine mystique" as the heightened awareness of the expectations of women and how each woman has to fit a certain role as a little girl, an uneducated and unemployed teenager, and finally as a wife and mother who is to happily clean the kitchen and cook things all day. After World War II, a lot of women's organizations began to appear with the goal of bringing the issues of equal rights into the limelight.

The stereotype even came down to the color of a woman's hair. Many women wished that they could be blonde because that was the ideal hair color. In The Feminine Mystique, Friedan writes that "across America, three out of every ten women dyed their hair blonde" (Kerber/DeHart 514). This serves as an example of how there was such a push for women to fit a certain mold which was portrayed as the role of women. Blacks were naturally excluded from the notion of ideal women and they suffered additional discrimination which was even greater than that which the white women suffered from.

In addition to hair color, women often went to great lengths to achieve a thin figure. The look that women were striving for was the look of the thin model. Many women wore tight, uncomfortable clothing in order to create the illusion of being thinner and some even took pills that were supposed to make them lose weight.

The role of women was to find a husband to support the family that they would raise. Many women dropped out of college or never went in the first place because they were lead to believe that working outside of the home was for men and that it would not be feminine for them to get jobs and be single without a husband or children to take care of.

An enormous problem for women was the psychological stress of dealing with this role that was presented to them. The happily married, perpetually baking, eternally mopping, Donna Reed that lived in every house on the block with her hard working husband and her twelve children that existed in the media made women feel that there was something wrong with them if they didn't enjoy their housewife lifestyle. And it was not easy for women to deal with this problem. As Betty Friedan writes in The Feminine Mystique, "For over fifteen years women in America found it harder to talk about this problem than about sex. (Kerber/DeHart 515)."

Many psychiatrists were baffled and the problem was often ignored with no known solution because everyone found it to not make any sense.

Women of low economic status also struggled a great deal because they had to

deal

with the problems associated with a single income household which could become very frustrating when she has every reason to get a job, but cannot. It is also harder to raise children with a low income and provide for the family as she was expected to.

It is interesting to apply the notion of the feminine mystique to modern culture and see that it often still exists. Though there are many women who are getting jobs, there are still a lot of families that fit the mold of the traditional family with the breadwinner and the bread baker with bunch of kids running around.

The benefits which arose from this oppression were that women began to fight back.

NOW activists began to use both traditional and non-traditional means to push for social change. They have done and continue to do extensive electoral and lobbying work in addition to organizing mass marches, rallies, pickets, and counter-demonstrations. NOW re-instituted mass marches for women's rights in the face of conventional wisdom that marches were a technique that died out with the 1960s. A march in support of the Equal Rights Amendment drew more than 100,000 people to Washington, DC in 1978. NOW's March for Women's Lives in 1992 became the largest protest ever in the capital.

One of the ways that women's lives and experiences have been divided is through discrimination based on sexual orientation. The 1960's fueled a lot of strong movements and the Gay Rights Movement was one of the many that came out of this decade. Gaining a lot of momentum from the ideas of acceptance and equality sparked by the Civil Rights Movement, the Gay Rights Movement set out to achieve acceptance in the general population. A primary historical event involving homosexuality is the Stonewall Riot which grew out of a police raid in a gay bar in June of 1969. This event sparked a chain reaction which resulted in the Gay Rights Movement. The effects of the Gay Rights Movement still exist today with a wider acceptance of homosexuality and the existence of many homosexual organizations which promote homosexual support.

The basic goals of the movement were to eliminate the laws which prohibited homosexual activity, provide equal housing and employment opportunities for homosexuals, and to create a wider acceptance among the heterosexual community. Still there was a lot of opposition to those who accepted homosexuality.

Still there was a lot of oppression felt by lesbian women, even among the homosexual realm. In 1971 NOW became the first major national women's organization to support lesbian rights. It has been one of the organization's priority issues since 1975, and was the theme of national conferences in 1984 and 1988. Through the years, NOW activists have

challenged anti-lesbian and gay laws and ballot initiatives in many states. Over 15 years ago, NOW gave strong support to a landmark 1979 case, *Belmont v. Belmont*, that defined lesbian partners as a nurturing family and awarded a lesbian mother custody of her two children. The plaintiff in that case, Rosemary Dempsey, is NOW's Action Vice-President.

A lot of people still are afraid to show support for homosexual organizations. Within the religious community lies the largest of debates regarding the issue of homosexuality. The majority of the Christian leaders reject homosexuality and define it as a sin that must be dealt with. Yet the greatest debate exists between disagreeing Christian leaders. Some denominations permit homosexual pastors to lead their churches, which is offensive to those who are opposed to it, while others neither condone nor reject the issue. This is especially important for lesbian women who wish to be church leaders because they have to face those who claim that, not only should they forbid homosexual pastors, but that women should not be allowed to take leadership positions in the church.

When the era of the Gay Rights Movement is compared with the silence that was required of homosexuals during the colonial period, it becomes apparent that there have been great advances through history. Lesbian women were forced to repress their sexuality and get married in order to live a "normal" life.

Even after homosexuality began its emergence in the 1970s, lesbianism was often forgotten somewhere among the controversy. In the words of feminist author Kate Millett in her book, *Sexual Politics* which was written in 1970, "'Lesbianism' would appear to be so little a threat at the moment that it is hardly ever mentioned... Whatever its potentiality in sexual politics, female homosexuality is currently so dead an issue that while male homosexuality gains a grudging tolerance, in women the event is observed in scorn or in silence (pt. 3, ch. 8)." There seems to be no distinction made between homosexual men and homosexual women in the media and this causes another form of separation.

