

AUSTERITY, AFFLUENCE AND DISCONTENT: BRITAIN, 1951-1979

*Part 4: “We’re not beautiful, we’re not ugly, we’re
angry”*

*How far did the lives of women change in this
period?*



Source 1: Swinging London – young people on Carnaby Street in the 1960s

How much did the lives of women change between 1951 and 1979?



Source 2: A photograph from the 1950s showing a husband and wife in the kitchen

Women's role in the home¹

The traditional role for women was to be a good wife and mother – to keep the home clean, and make sure the children and husband were fed. This was still considered to be true even in the early 1960s, especially amongst working-class women. Women were expected to give up their job and personal independence when they married or when their first child was born. According to *Woman's Own* magazine in 1961, 'the most important thing they can do in life is to be wives and mothers'.²

The 'Janet and John' series of children's early reading books was first published in Britain in 1949 and reinforced the traditional role for women. Janet was always helping out mum with the housework, while John cleaned the car or built bonfires with dad. Dad went to work, mum stayed at home; mum was always prettily dressed and dad was always appreciative of a clean house and cooked meal. Keeping the house clean and the family fed were not always easy. In the early 1950s feeding the family often required a lot of planning and preparation as rationing was still in effect, and clothes had to be washed and the house cleaned by hand.

FOCUS : changes in shopping

Before the 1950s, food shopping had been done either by means of regular home deliveries (milkmen or grocer's vans), or by going to shop in local butchers, bakers and greengrocers. Often this shopping had to be done every day as it was difficult to keep perishable food for long without

¹ Family life in 1964 is discussed in a BBC documentary which may be seen at <http://goo.gl/EtppXI>

² This is quoted as Source B in Stuart Clayton, *Mass Media, Popular Culture and Social Change in Britain since 1945* (Edexcel, 2010), page 158.

3 Austerity, Affluence and Discontent, 1951-1979: Part 4

a refrigerator. Shops were very different to how they are now. They were small and usually very specialised in one particular product. Local shopkeepers often knew most of their customers by name. Customers did not pick items up themselves and take them to a till – they had to ask a shop assistant to get them what they needed from the shelves or a store room.

The 1950s saw the rise of self-service shops in which customers picked up the items they wanted to buy and took them to a till to pay. In 1947 there were only ten self-service shops in the whole of Britain. By 1956 there were 3,000, with 12,000 by 1962 and 24,000 in 1967. The self-service system started with the Co-op in London in 1942 because of a wartime shortage of staff, and then spread to other shops like Tesco in St Albans in 1947. By 1952 half of Tesco stores were self-service.



Source 3: A woman shopping in a 1950s 'self-service' shop

The next step was the supermarket, a large store which sold a wide range of different products in large quantities. There is some debate about which was the first British supermarket³. Sainsbury's converted a building in Croydon in 1950, while its first purpose-built supermarket opened in Eastbourne in 1952; Tesco converted a disused cinema in Maldon, Essex which opened in 1956. There were 367 supermarkets in 1960, but by 1967 there were 3,000. Supermarkets were efficient and convenient and stocked a variety of products and produce. Their displays were often very impressive and their produce kept fresh for longer in refrigerated cabinets. Rising car ownership meant that people were able to travel further to shop and carry more home with them. The government system for keeping prices comparable between shops (called 'Retail Price Maintenance') ended in 1964 and supermarkets were able to offer discounts that smaller shops could not match⁴. By the end of the 1950s the daily local shop had been replaced by the weekly supermarket shop.

Convenience foods, supermarkets and new, cheaper appliances made women's role as housewives easier:

- Refrigerators and supermarkets meant you no longer needed a daily shop or delivery
- Washing machines⁵ meant hours more free time that was not being spent washing by hand
- Vacuum cleaners meant cleaning could be done quickly without brushes, dusters and dustpans.

³ A BBC News clip about the beginnings of British supermarkets may be seen at <http://goo.gl/0umkSN>

⁴ A BBC News clip about Asda introducing the 'superstore' or 'hypermarket' may be seen at <http://goo.gl/GWdOas>

⁵ A 1950s advert for a washing machine may be seen at <http://goo.gl/qrLww6>

4 Austerity, Affluence and Discontent, 1951-1979: Part 4

According to *New Look* magazine in 1964:

The female kitchen is the temple of those twin symbols of the new life – the refrigerator and the washing machine.⁶

In an interview about life at that time, Christine Fagg, who was a housewife in the 1950s and 1960s, said:

I wanted to desperately do things outside the home. I was always trying to think of shortcuts to the housework, to get out and stimulate my own interests, and that's where the washing machine, Hoover, etc. really came into their own.⁷

Advertising domestic products was still aimed entirely at women,⁸ e.g. Kenwood appliances used the phrase, 'Your servant, Madam'. Adverts reinforced the idea that women should be good wives and mothers:

- The child who didn't get beaten up at school anymore because his mum washed his shirts bright white
- The husband who resisted the temptation of other women because his wife kept their house clean using disinfectant.

Between 1957 and 1967 annual spending on weekly and monthly magazines which contained many of these adverts went up from £46 million to £80 million a year. The biggest growth was in 'women's magazines' – *Woman* was read by 50% of women in the UK in 1957.⁹ As well as this, radio programmes like *Woman's Hour* bombarded housewives with recipes and handy household tips.

A 1950s survey by the newspaper *Manchester Guardian* found that 40% of women were content with their role but 50% were bored a lot of the time. Gradual recognition of the boredom of the life of the housewife led to founding the National Housewives' Register. This was set up in 1960 by Wirral housewife Maureen Nicol as a mutual support network for bored housewives, organising talks and coffee mornings through local newsletters to break up the daily routine. It had 15,000 members by 1970.¹⁰

⁶ This is quoted in Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 85.

⁷ Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat – A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London, 2006), page 691.

⁸ Clips about women in 1950s advertising may be seen at <http://goo.gl/B86I0I> and <http://goo.gl/rMAFmf>

⁹ Stuart Clayton, *Mass Media, Popular Culture and Social Change in Britain since 1945* (Edexcel, 2010), page 163.

¹⁰ Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 85.

Women and education¹¹

Even after the 1944 Education Act women's education was still biased towards domestic life. The 1959 Crowther Report confirmed this and the Newsom Report in 1963 said that schools should provide a flat for girls to practice the skills of running a home and that a girl's education should follow 'broad themes of home making'.¹² Many women left school at the minimum leaving age and married young. The average age for women getting married in the 1960s was 22, and two in every three births were to women under the age of 25.¹³

According to the 1959 Crowther Education Report on education which was commissioned by the government:

The prospect of courtship and marriage should rightly influence the education of the adolescent girl.¹⁴

In 1954 it was considered that too many girls were passing the 11-plus exam compared to boys. In that year girls should have made up two-thirds of pupils going to grammar schools so a law was passed to limit the number of girls who could go. Facilities at some girls' grammar schools were not as good as those for boys as they did not have decent science facilities.

The Report to the House of Commons Select Committee 1973 stated:

Perhaps the greatest single contributory factor to the position of women as second class citizens in the matter of employment has been the lack of opportunity for girls in school to participate in the technological developments of recent years [physics, metalwork, computing, etc.]¹⁵

Many of the women who passed their O Levels went on to do A Levels, although many of those women who did make it as far as university married soon after getting their degrees. The number of women studying at university grew steadily as a result of improving education, and because of the availability of university grants to pay for living expenses:

- In 1970, 183,000 women went to university, making up 40% of the total student population;
- In 1975, 214,000 women went to university, making up 41% of the total student population.¹⁶

However, students were still twice as likely to get a university place if they were a boy rather than a girl into the 1980s.

¹¹ Malory School, Kent filmed in colour in 1959 with a focus on what girls were learning <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pe23n-Z6Lg>

¹² Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat – A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London, 2006), page 689.

¹³ Nigel Bushnell and Cathy Warren, *History Controlled Assessment: CA11 Change in British society 1955–75* (Edexcel, 2010), page 16.

¹⁴ Colin P. F. Hughes, Catrin Stevens and R. Paul Evans, *The Changing Role and Status of Women during the 20th Century* (Aberystwyth, 2012), page 63.

¹⁵ J. A. Cloake, *Britain in the Modern World* (Oxford, 1994), page 44.

¹⁶ Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 115.



Source 4: A female student in the 1960s

Women and work¹⁷

During the Second World War women had shown that they were willing and capable of work and could balance family and working life. The system of government-run day nurseries was disbanded after 1945. The continuation of free school meals after the war made it easier for women to work, although the government had introduced the Family Allowance in 1946 to try and persuade women that they did not need to work to earn money to look after their children.

When men came home from the war after 1945 many women had to give them their jobs back. According to a trade union leader after the war, 'Men hate their girls going out to work and impairing their own dignity as head of the house'.¹⁸ Women were sent back to doing the jobs they had done before the war – domestic, clerical, nursing and shop work, where there was increasing demand for workers in new supermarkets.

Only 1 in 5 married women went to work in 1951.¹⁹ *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (1953) was a very influential book by John Bowlby. It said that **juvenile delinquency** was the result of mothers abandoning their children and going to work. Working mothers were often portrayed as unnatural or selfish, abandoning their children to go to work, especially in an age when rising wages for men were making many homes affluent without women needing to work as well. Childminders and nurseries were very expensive and hard to find. This 'anti-work' attitude did gradually change – in 1943 some 58% of people opposed the idea of married women working, but this was down to 11% by 1965.²⁰

¹⁷ Programmes about women and work may be seen on the BBC Archive website: <http://goo.gl/LxNxGO> and <http://goo.gl/IRfvF4>

¹⁸ Colin Shephard and Rosemary Rees, *British Depth Study 1939–1975* (London, 2010), page 33.

¹⁹ Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good* (London, 2005), page 414.

²⁰ Stuart Clayton, *Mass Media, Popular Culture and Social Change in Britain since 1945* (Edexcel, 2010), page 161.

7 Austerity, Affluence and Discontent, 1951-1979: Part 4

There was a gradual increase in the number of women with jobs:

- Before the war only 10% of married women had jobs
- In 1951 22% of married women had jobs²¹
- Over 30% of married women had jobs by 1961
- 47% of married women had jobs by 1971.²²

Better-educated middle-class women took on jobs outside the home.

There were no shortage of jobs for women because:

- There was full employment for men already
- Many employers preferred to employ women as they did not have to pay them as much as men until the 1970s
- Many jobs no longer required women to give up work when they got married from the early 1950s onwards
- Newer industries like electronics and chemicals did not need the brute strength of men
- Government organisations like the NHS (set up in 1948) and the DVLA (set up in 1965) needed a lot of clerks and typists²³
- Many women only wanted part-time work so they could continue to look after the house and family, which also suited employers as it gave them more flexibility with their workforce.²⁴

Table 1: Women in paid employment 1951–1971²⁵

	1951	1961	1971
Women as % of the total workforce	31%	33%	37%

Although the number of women in work increased, there was little improvement in the range of jobs that women were doing:

- In the 1960s, a total of 80% of all factory, shop and secretarial work was done by women

²¹ Colin Shephard and Rosemary Rees, *British Depth Study 1939–1975* (London, 2010), page 35.

²² Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain 1970–1974* (London, 2010), pages 392–3.

²³ A short clip from a Department of Employment film from 1969 about girls choosing the work they want to do carefully may be seen at <http://goo.gl/5f8Wju>

²⁴ These difficulties are explored in a BBC Archive programme from 1966 which may be seen at <http://goo.gl/U9v4oA>

²⁵ This is adapted from Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 107.

8 Austerity, Affluence and Discontent, 1951-1979: Part 4

- By 1975, a total of 97% of canteen assistants, 92% of nurses, 92% of cleaners, 81% of shop keepers and 60% of teachers were women.

Women were still highly concentrated in lower status lower paid jobs. There were regional variations – more women worked in the more affluent south-east than in less prosperous areas such as Wales.

The number of women in **professional jobs** was rising slowly:

- In 1960 only 15% of doctors and 5% of lawyers were women.
- In 1970 only 5% of women achieved a managerial position in their employment
- In 1980 only 8% of lawyers, 4% of architects and 1% of accountants were women.²⁶

There were very few women MPs, even though a female Prime Minister was elected in 1979. After the 1979 election only 19 out of the 650 MPs were women.



Source 4: New Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on the steps of 10 Downing Street in 1979

Equality²⁷

1) Equal pay

Women had started joining trade unions during the war and unions were often happy to fight the case for better and equal pay for all of their members. In 1951 women in teaching, the civil service and local government started to campaign for equal pay. They used marches, demonstrations and petitions to lobby MPs with the slogan 'Equal Pay – When?'. In 1955 the government agreed to raise women's pay in these areas gradually until it was the same as men's.

The justification for paying women less than men was that women were only expected to work for a few years before getting married and having children. It was therefore not necessary to pay them the same as men who would be doing the same job for twenty or thirty years. Another argument was that a woman's wage was the 'second' wage into the household after her husband's. As women were not paying for the essentials in the household, they did not need to be paid as much

²⁶ Christopher Culpin and Brian Turner, *Making Modern Britain* (Collins Educational, 1987), page 224.

²⁷ This is discussed in a programme on the BBC Archive website which may be seen at <http://goo.gl/b9j4v9>

9 Austerity, Affluence and Discontent, 1951-1979: Part 4

as the money would only be spent on holidays and gadgets.

In the early 1960s industrialists noticed that women were not taking on scientific and technical training so they employed the London School of Economics to find out why. In 1968 a Royal Commission published the results which identified three problems:

- Unequal pay; women were being paid on average 75% of the wage that men were getting for doing the same job
- A lack of nurseries and day-care for women who had children too young to go to school
- A deeply-held belief that women were mothers and housewives and that men should be going out earning a wage, so there was no need to train women for a job.

Why did things change? The main reasons were as follows:

- In 1968 forty women machinists at the Ford factory in Dagenham²⁸ went on strike for three weeks demanding equal pay (their job of making headrests and seat covers was classed as 'unskilled' so they were earning less than male cleaners). They received 92% of their pay demand with the support of Barbara Castle, the Labour Secretary of State for Employment.²⁹
- Barbara Castle got trade unions, the government and employers (CBI) to work together on how to achieve equal pay for women
- Women's rights organisations like the Fawcett Society began lobbying MPs to give women equal opportunities – a rally in 1969 was attended by 30,000 people
- Some newspapers began to run campaigns about the equal pay issue – in May 1968 *The Times* said that the current situation was 'a great waste of potentially useful skills'³⁰
- The UK government had to ensure that men and women had equal pay and equal opportunities so that it could sign the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and join the EEC in the 1970s. According to the Treaty of Rome, 'Each Member State shall during the first stage ensure and subsequently maintain the application of the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work'.³¹

The Equal Pay Act 1970 was introduced by Barbara Castle, and required businesses to give equal rates of pay to men and women doing the same job. Employers were given five years to put this in place, to ensure that they could afford the extra costs. Because of the vague terms of the Act it was easy for employers to avoid implementing it and several other acts were needed to clarify important issues. The Employment Protection Act 1975 had to be passed so that women could not be dismissed from a job for being pregnant. Employers also had to give women 18 weeks maternity leave, paid at 90% of their normal pay.

²⁸ There is a short piece from the Channel 4 News about this at <http://goo.gl/Lb0Wi6> and Film Education have produced some materials explaining the historical background of the film *Made in Dagenham* (2010) at <http://goo.gl/MY3c10>

²⁹ The BBC News obituary for Barbara Castle may be seen at <http://goo.gl/oP85lo>

³⁰ Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain 1970–1974* (London, 2010), page 374.

³¹ Colin P. F. Hughes, Catrin Stevens and R. Paul Evans, *The Changing Role and Status of Women during the 20th Century* (Aberystwyth, 2012), page 107.

In 1970 a report showed that women's average pay was only 63.1% of men's pay.³² By 1980 that figure had risen to 73.5%.³³ Some women took their cases for equal pay to the European Court which showed that there was still work to be done in this area – the gap between men and women's pay was closing but there was still a difference. The Women and Employment survey of 1980 found that 63% of women still worked in jobs commonly done by women at that time (e.g. nursing) so there was no legal basis to challenge their low pay.³⁴

2) Equal opportunities

There was another important employment issue for women – a lack of opportunities, both in terms of the jobs they were allowed to do, and how highly they could be promoted. These limits were referred to as a 'glass ceiling' that women could not break through. Many employers rejected women for certain jobs, thinking that they would leave soon to get married or have children. Some employers even thought that women had characteristics that should bar them from a job, or believed that it was a man's job.

Mary Stott,³⁵ a journalist working at the *Manchester Evening News*, remembered being sacked from the post of deputy editor of the newspaper in 1950 in the BBC documentary *People's Century* in 1995:

I went to the editor and said, "Why am I not to go on doing this deputy editor's job?" He said, "Oh, Mary, there's nothing wrong with your work, but we have to safeguard the succession and the successor has to be a man". End message. How can you go on doing something knowing there is no promotion, knowing that young men whom you have helped to train will inevitably jump over you?³⁶

The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 made it illegal to refuse a job to a woman on the grounds of her gender.³⁷ The Equal Opportunities Commission was set up to investigate discrimination. It had 2,500 enquiries in the first two weeks.³⁸ There was an impact on schools as all subjects now had to be open to boys and girls. The Act also guaranteed women access to housing, and monitored their portrayal in advertisements. By 1980 more women were entering business and professional occupations, but there were still important issues, like access to childcare, to be resolved.

³² Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 107.

³³ Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 108.

³⁴ Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain 1970–1974* (London, 2010), page 394.

³⁵ Mary Stott ended up having a long career in journalism running the women's section of *The Guardian* – read her obituary at <http://goo.gl/Th77oB>

³⁶ Colin Shephard and Rosemary Rees, *British Depth Study 1939–1975* (London, 2010), page 36. Also see the BBC *People's Century* episode '1970: Half the People' at <http://goo.gl/Z70KZ0>

³⁷ The potential impact of this is discussed in a BBC2 programme from 1975 on the BBC Archive website <http://goo.gl/tCsR6V>

³⁸ Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain 1970–1974* (London, 2010), page 394.

Women and the right to choose³⁹

1) Abortion

There was a huge social stigma attached to being an unmarried mother in the 1950s and 1960s. Sometimes women handed their babies over to neighbours or other members of their family to bring up as their own. Many of these women were sent to 'unmarried mothers' homes', of which there were 200 around the UK in the 1950s. In these homes women were pressurised to give their babies up for adoption. As many as 40,000 unmarried pregnant women were sent to these homes per year, and more than half of them were teenagers.⁴⁰ There was no government regulation for these homes as most were run by church organisations. Women in these homes had little access to trained medical staff and were often used as cheap labour.

Why did attitudes towards abortion change?

- The Abortion Law Reform Association had campaigned for abortion reform since the 1930s
- In the 1950s and 1960s there were around 100,000 illegal and dangerous 'backstreet' abortions a year; 35,000 women were admitted to hospital a year with post-abortion complications; between 1958 and 1960 a total of 82 women died from these illegal abortions
- Between 1959 and 1962 the poorly-tested Thalidomide drug had been given to pregnant women with morning sickness, resulting in physical deformities in their children when they were born; this convinced many people that abortion would be acceptable if a deformity had been detected in an unborn child
- In 1965 the Church of England said that it would consider abortion to be justified if 'there was a threat to the mother's life or well-being'.

In 1967 the Abortion Act, proposed by Liberal MP David Steel and supported by Labour MP Roy Jenkins, was passed by Parliament. It legalised abortion within the first 28 weeks of pregnancy, providing that it was done under medical supervision and signed off by two different doctors. It was legal if it prevented physical or mental harm to the mother or if the unborn child was potentially disabled. This could be done at private clinics or on the NHS.

There were many objections to this law, usually on religious grounds. For example, the Catholic Church and the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child are still campaigning against abortion today. On the other hand, some women's rights campaigners complained that this law did not go far enough as it was not 'abortion on demand'. Many people were shocked by how many abortions there were once they became legalised, thinking that the availability of better education and family planning would make it unnecessary for many women.

³⁹ The position of women in relationships in 1965 is discussed in a BBC2 programme on the BBC Archive website at <http://goo.gl/F75Afe>

⁴⁰ Nigel Bushnell and Cathy Warren, *History Controlled Assessment: CA11 Change in British society 1955–75* (Edexcel, 2010), page 29.

Table 2: Numbers of legal abortions⁴¹

YEAR	Women who had abortions	Women who had abortions aged less than 16	Women who had abortions aged 16 to 19	Women who had abortions who were not married	Proportion of abortions to live births
1970	75,400	1,700	13,500	34,100	96:1000
1975	106,200	3,600	24,100	52,300	176:1000
1980	128,900	3,700	31,900	68,800	196:1000

2) Family planning⁴²

'The Pill' was an oral contraceptive licensed for use in the UK after trials in Birmingham and Slough in 1961. It was available for free to married women on the NHS because the Secretary of State, Keith Joseph, thought that it would be a way to reduce poverty by reducing unwanted pregnancies. By 1964 some 500,000 women were using it. The cost (£1 per woman per month) and effects were widely debated in the media. Between 1961 and 1962 there were 400 items on teenage sexual behaviour in UK newspapers.

The Family Planning Act 1967 said that local authorities had to provide contraceptives and family planning advice via the Family Planning Association to anyone who wanted it, not just those who were married.

Not everyone agreed with increasing access to contraception. In 1968 Pope Paul VI, head of the Catholic Church, issued the 'Encyclical Humanae Vitae' which publicly restated the Catholic Church's view that contraception was against God's law. By 1970 only 19% of married couples under the age of 45 used it, and only 9% of single women.⁴³

3) Divorce

Divorce rates had risen sharply in the five years after the end of the war as long-distance relationships and war traumas caused many marriages to break down. By the 1950s the **nuclear family** made up the majority of families and divorce rates dropped back. Divorce still carried a **social stigma**.⁴⁴ Children were embarrassed that their parents were divorced and would go to great lengths to hide it from their school friends.

The Divorce Reform Act 1969⁴⁵ made a 'no fault' divorce possible. Irretrievable breakdown of the marriage could now be the only reason for granting divorce. Couples could now divorce if they had lived apart for two years and they both wanted it, or they had lived apart for five years and only one of them wanted it. Under the previous divorce laws the husband or wife had to prove the other partner was guilty of adultery, cruelty, desertion or insanity.

Opponents claimed that the new law would lead to the breakup of the traditional family. In 1950 there were two divorce decrees for every 1,000 married couples but by the 1970s one in every two marriages ended this way⁴⁶ and increasing numbers of relationships involved **cohabitation** rather than marriage.

⁴¹ Andrew Boxer with Keith Lockton and Elizabeth Sparey, *The End of Consensus: Britain 1945–90* (Essex, 2009), page 97.

⁴² Impact of the Pill clip <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02cfcbn>

⁴³ Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 37.

⁴⁴ A programme about coping with divorce before the law was changed may be seen at <http://goo.gl/9js6DA>

⁴⁵ A clip from a BBC *Panorama* programme about divorce may be seen at <http://goo.gl/yoOLsv>

⁴⁶ Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 83

13 Austerity, Affluence and Discontent, 1951-1979: Part 4

Table 3: Numbers of marriages and divorce⁴⁷

Year	Marriages	Divorces
1950	358,000	31,000
1955	358,000	27,000
1960	344,000	24,000
1965	371,000	38,000
1970	415,000	58,000
1975	381,000	120,000
1980	370,000	148,000

By the end of the 1960s marriage seemed less important. Increasing numbers of couples cohabited before getting married or had long-term relationships and families without getting married at all. The number of divorces rose and so did the number of **illegitimate births** from 5.8% of births in 1960 to 8.2% of births in 1970. New laws helped women to escape difficult relationships, but not the problems of bringing up their children alone.

- Other laws that improved women's status within marriage:
- Married Women's Property Act 1964 – this allowed women to keep half the money they saved from housekeeping
- Matrimonial Homes Act 1967 – this recognised that men and women had equal rights of occupation in the family home
- Matrimonial Property Act 1970 – a wife's work was an equal contribution to making a home so should be taken into account when dividing up property in a divorce
- Guardianship of Children Act 1973 – gave mothers equal rights to fathers in bringing up children

Feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement⁴⁸

1) Feminism

In the 1960s the mini skirt became the symbol of women's independence but it was also seen by some as part of the female stereotype of women as 'sex objects' for men. **Sexist attitudes** continued to be seen in all areas of life into the 1970s and beyond.

Feminism was not a new idea. It had begun with the campaign to get women the vote in the 1900s, and had continued with the campaign to get women better rights with regard to contraception and their families in the 1920s. By the 1960s feminism was supported by women of all ages. It demanded a radical shift in the balance of power between men and women. The Women's Liberation Movement, as it was known, was not a single organisation, but a collection of different feminist groups and ideas with the common theme of trying to improve the lives of women in the UK.

⁴⁷ The numbers of divorces are from Andrew Boxer with Keith Lockton and Elizabeth Sparey, *The End of Consensus: Britain 1945–90* (Essex, 2009), page 97 and <http://goo.gl/0PozHo>; the numbers of marriages are from <http://goo.gl/ISIKQK>

⁴⁸ Feminists explain and debate their views on the BBC Archive: <http://goo.gl/sVluMy> (short clip from Radio 4 programme) and <http://goo.gl/WdyQDI> (25 min programme from BBC2)

14 Austerity, Affluence and Discontent, 1951-1979: Part 4

Local Women's Liberation groups began to appear in the late 1960s:

- The fishermen's wives of Hull who campaigned for safety at sea
- The London bus conductresses who campaigned for the right to train as bus drivers
- Peckham Rye Group and other local branches of the Women's Liberation Workshop who met to discuss feminist issues – the Peckham Rye Group described housework in 1971 as “An endless routine...like a pet mouse in its cage spinning round on its exercise wheel”.⁴⁹

There was also very public support for feminism from famous actresses like Vanessa Redgrave, writers like Doris Lessing and Iris Murdoch and politicians like Labour's Barbara Castle and Shirley Williams.

More and more articles and books were being written about feminist ideas. *Shrew* magazine (1969) gave analysis of women's position in society and detailed feminist news. *Spare Rib* magazine started in July 1972 and sold 20,000 copies a month, even though some mainstream newsagents like W H Smith refused to sell it because it was too radical. These publications were intended to combat traditional magazines like *Woman* and *Woman's Own* which were still focusing on women as domestic goddesses. Elaine Morgan wrote *The Descent of Woman* in 1972 in which she questioned men's dominant role by focussing on the evolution of women. Feminist book publishing company Virago was launched in 1973.

FOCUS: Germaine Greer and the Female Eunuch

The Female Eunuch (1969), written by Australian academic Germaine Greer, was an important feminist book. The title of the book came from the idea that becoming suburban married consumer wives took away women's true potential – turning them into **eunuchs**. ‘Like beasts, for example, who are castrated in farming in order to serve their master's ulterior motives – to be fattened or made docile – women have been cut off from their capacity for action,’ as Greer explained to the *New York Times* in 1971.⁵⁰ It was much more extreme than most feminist literature as it was liberating women rather than gaining equality with men. The book did get a lot of media attention as Greer was widely interviewed in newspapers, magazines and on TV and radio.

The book explained how women were oppressed by men – the traditional roles of the sexes were learned and not natural; the differences between men and women were exaggerated. It showed how girls are conditioned to follow a female stereotype, and what they have done and can do to fight against it. Greer believed that most women lived miserable and unfulfilled lives because the ideas of romantic love and happy families were a myth.

The Women's Liberation Movement had started in the USA in the late 1960s. It was heavily influenced by student protest movements about civil rights and the Vietnam War. The movement had been inspired by Betty Friedan who wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. In this book she argued that being a housewife was like being locked in a prison as it prevented women from achieving their true potential. She then went on to set up the National Organisation of Women in 1966 to campaign for ‘a truly equal partnership between the sexes’. One of the most talked

⁴⁹ This quote may be seen at <http://goo.gl/8ojMml> and has been taken from Ann Oakley, *The Ann Oakley Reader: Gender, women and social science* (Great Britain, 2005), page 75.

⁵⁰ From <http://goo.gl/eoy7or> The original article on Germaine Greer may be seen here: <http://goo.gl/pUlefz>

15 Austerity, Affluence and Discontent, 1951-1979: Part 4

about protests was when women dumped their bras into dustbins outside the 1968 Miss America contest.

In 1969 the Women's National Co-ordination Committee was set up to bring the different strands and elements of the women's movement together. The first National Women's Liberation Conference was held at Ruskin College, Oxford in February 1970 with four demands:

- Equal pay
- Free contraception and abortion on request
- Equal educational and job opportunities
- Free 24-hour childcare.

Feminists in Britain continued to protest for equal rights for women. In November 1970, at the Miss World Contest at the Royal Albert Hall in London, feminist protesters pelted the compere, US comedian Bob Hope, with flour and smoke bombs. This received a lot of publicity, with television and newspaper coverage showing women with placards and t-shirts covered in slogans, like 'Miss-fortune demands equal pay for women, Miss-conception demands abortion for all women, Miss-placed demands a place outside the home'.⁵¹ In March 1971, on the first International Women's Day, 4000 feminists marched through London and handed a petition for more women's rights to the Prime Minister, Edward Heath.



Source 6: Women's Liberation protesters outside the 1970 Miss World Contest in London

There were successes for feminism in the 1970s – equal pay and equal opportunities legislation, guaranteed property rights, guardianship of children and protection from domestic violence. Other issues like access to childcare and sexual harassment still needed to be dealt with. By the end of the 1970s women had more choices about how they could live their lives, but they were still discriminated against and not treated equally to men.

⁵¹ Colin P. F. Hughes, Catrin Stevens and R. Paul Evans, *The Changing Role and Status of Women during the 20th Century* (Aberystwyth, 2012), page 109.

2) Some other feminist campaigns

- 1974: The Women's Aid Federation was set up to provide refuges for women to escape from domestic violence and the Domestic Violence Act 1976 gave women some protection from violent husbands
- 1975: The 'Wages for Housework' campaign demanded that the government should pay women for work in the home that did not pay a wage; this was unsuccessful
- 1976: The Women's Peace Movement tried to bring an end to the violence between Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland; its founders won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977.

3) Did 1970s feminism end sexism towards women?

The women's movement did not have widespread support. Its aims were difficult for many to understand and their more extreme, publicity-grabbing methods got them press coverage but also trivialised what they stood for in the eyes of many. Continued protest did, at least, keep the issue of women's rights in the public eye.

There were a number of developments which showed that the women's movement still had a long way to go to achieve equality:

- There were on-going critical newspaper stories about feminists who considered words like 'chairman' and 'manhole' to be sexist (although the Labour Party did start using the term 'chair person' in the 1970s)
- *The Sun* introduced the female nude 'Page 3' model in 1970 – it was Britain's best-selling newspaper
- There was increasing organised opposition from both men and women to feminism.⁵² The Campaign for the Feminine Woman,⁵³ an organisation originally started in the early twentieth century to oppose giving women the right to vote, was revived in 1978: members believe that women working outside the home has done a lot of harm to family life and that feminism was a 'dangerous cancer'.
- Women's magazines continued to focus on fashion, romance, family and dieting and advertising continued to demonstrate sexist attitudes towards women.

⁵² A BBC2 programme about this campaign may be seen on the BBC Archive at <http://goo.gl/7JmMMb>

⁵³ This is referred to in Peter Barberis, John McHugh and Mike Tyldesley, *Encyclopedia of British and Irish Political Organizations: Parties, Groups and Movements of the Twentieth Century* (London, 2000), page 454.

GLOSSARY

Professional jobs	Highly qualified, well paid
Juvenile delinquency	Teenage crime
Nuclear family	Husband, wife, children
Social stigma	Disapproval by other people
Cohabitation	Living together
Illegitimate births	Parents are not married
Sexist attitudes	Discriminating against women because of their gender
Feminism	Promoting women's equality to men
Eunuchs	A word usually meaning men who have been castrated

RECOMMENDED MATERIALS

VIDEO:

Andrew Marr's History of Modern Britain: episode 2 'The Land of Lost Content'

This film is available on DVD:

Made in Dagenham

Quadrophenia

READING:

Colin P. F. Hughes, Catrin Stevens and R. Paul Evans, *The Changing Role and Status of Women during the 20th Century* (Aberystwyth, 2012).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Source 1: Flickr Creative Commons; <https://goo.gl/vBb3mH>

Source 2: © MARKA Alamy

Source 3: Flickr Creative Commons; <https://goo.gl/2VJEGb>

Source 4: © MARKA Alamy

Source 5: © MARKA Alamy

Source 6: © Getty images

This resource is provided to support the teaching and learning of GCSE History. The materials provide an introduction to the main concepts of the topic and should be used in conjunction with other resources and sound classroom teaching.