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“Women Without Men” versus “Men Without Women”: The Contrast Between Unmarried Men and Unmarried Women in Cold War American Society
By Rachael Barrett

In its July 5, 1960 issue, *Look* magazine published an article entitled “Women Without Men.” The author of the article, Eleanor Harris, was curious about the growing number of single American women because they defied cultural expectations of marriage. She wondered how they felt about unmarried life, why they could not or would not get married, and what they were doing to change “their manless lot.”¹⁵ So many readers responded to “Women Without Men” that Harris wrote a follow-up article for the November 22, 1960 issue, entitled “Men Without Women,” about America’s unmarried men. In Harris’s view, women were much more desperate to get married than men, because women were “likely to get stranded if they waited too long to get married, but it was ‘never too late’ for men.”¹⁶ Harris used her articles about people who did not fit the gender role stereotypes of Cold War American society in order to help bolster those stereotypes by portraying the dissenters as abnormal.

As Nancy Cott demonstrated, the idea of marriage as superior to single life was present at the time of the founding fathers and continued even into the post-World War II period.¹⁷ Even more so than before, after WWII Americans as a society viewed marriage as the only way that adults could lead happy, fulfilled lives. This perception was even truer for women than for men, because while men could achieve fulfillment through their work, women could not because at that time, society looked down upon women who had careers. It saw career women as unnatural,

¹⁵ Harris, Eleanor. ““Women Without Men’: The Pros and Cons of a ‘Man-Free Life.’” *Look Magazine*, July 5, 1960, 1.

¹⁶ Harris, Eleanor. ““Men Without Women’: Look Magazine Offers a Guide to the Unmarried Man.” *Look Magazine*, November 22, 1960, 1.

¹⁷ Cott, Nancy F. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, 9.

unfeminine, and as futilely seeking fulfillment in an area that could offer them none.¹⁸ Societal convention dictated that a woman's place was in the home; few people publicly denounced this perception until Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.¹⁹ However, the mere fact that the writers at *Look* decided to write a piece about the lives of unmarried men and women signified that discussion on the subject of marriage was already taking place; the writers would not have seen a need to write about something undisputed. Harris's articles portrayed both the current ideas about marriage as well as the changes to those ideas. Eleanor Harris's two *Look* magazine articles, "Women Without Men" and "Men Without Women," are historically valuable because they provide examples of the perceptions that Cold War American society had about marriage, the double standard that existed in regards to gender and marriage at that time, and the changes that were occurring in people's—especially women's—ideas about marriage.

The articles demonstrate that Cold War American society saw marriage as the only way for both men and women to be happy or successful. Very early in "Women Without Men," Harris implied that unmarried women's "lack of steady male companionship" was a problem that they needed to fix.²⁰ Harris, whose views on the subject tallied with societal conventions, was suspicious of unmarried people.²¹ The general population viewed the unmarried state as a problem in part because they were worried about how soldiers who had recently returned from WWII were readjusting to civilian life. They perceived marriage as a cultural norm and therefore

¹⁸May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1988, 88-9.

¹⁹Linden-Ward, Blanche and Carol Hurd Green, *American Women in the 1960s: Changing the Future*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993, 146.

²⁰Harris, "Men Without Women," 1; Harris, "Women Without Men," 1.

²¹Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. New York: Viking, 2000, 12.

assumed that if the returning soldiers were not getting married, they were readjusting poorly.²² In addition, in Cold War America, society considered unmarried people potential communists, although anyone who did not follow cultural norms during the Cold War was under this same suspicion.²³ For these reasons, many young people felt pressured to get married. They may not have thought it would lead to happiness, but they assumed that it would help them avoid extreme unhappiness. Friedan supplied some examples of this way of thinking in *The Feminine Mystique*, when she asked high school and college girls about their thoughts on marriage. Many reported that they did not want to grow up, because they were afraid of becoming unhappy housewives like their mothers. Some also gave up their hobbies, like writing poetry, even if they were talented, because they knew that in order to be socially accepted, they had to show interest in boys.²⁴ Society told girls and women from a young age that their primary occupation should be that of a housewife.

In an effort to persuade her readers that her opinions about unmarried men and women were valid, Harris interviewed doctors and cited scientific findings which her many of her readers would have known about and accepted as true. Faced with the threat of nuclear war unless American technology surpassed Soviet technology, Americans placed much of their hope in science. One man Harris interviewed said that he was “indoctrinated in college with the scientific method of solving problems” and “found that method was applicable in almost every area of life.”²⁵ One way in which Harris appealed to this fascination with science was by citing Dr. Alfred Kinsey, who conducted studies in the late 1940s and early 50s about American

²² May, *Homeward Bound*, 88.

²³ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 16; Dicker, Rory Cooke. *A History of U.S. Feminisms*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008, 73.

²⁴ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1963, 73.

²⁵ Harris, “Men Without Women,” 3.

sexuality. Harris did not state this in her articles; she may have assumed that her readers were familiar with him and his work, because his *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* were bestsellers at the time she was writing.²⁶ Kinsey argued that sexuality, like many other aspects of life during the Cold War, such as political liberalism, needed to be contained. According to Kinsey's studies, many people felt that female sexuality had to be restrained, as they thought had become uncontrollable during WWII due to the perceived increasing frequency of extramarital affairs.²⁷ Harris agreed with Kinsey's findings and, in her articles, tried to convince her readers of their validity.

In addition, Harris, like Cold War society in general, portrayed working women as an anomaly. She said that: "occasionally, a manless woman has the foresight to take fresh stock of herself" and "decides to quit marking time in a job of little interest and to find—or invent—work that will absorb her."²⁸ These women "often" found "fascinating, self-fulfilling careers," but Harris maintained that only a few women stopped searching for a spouse long enough to reevaluate their lives.²⁹ Again, Harris's description of women mirrored that of Cold War American society in general. In the 1950s and early 60s, the housewife was an American "cultural icon." Contrary to this mode of thought, however, many married women admired their working counterparts, although they themselves felt they had to get married because "in real life women who had careers had no support from the culture."³⁰ Society considered those who did not conform to the housewife standard unfeminine, and did not publicize examples of women

²⁶ Scanlon, Jennifer. *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 70.

²⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 101; Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 71.

²⁸ Harris, "Women Without Men," 3.

²⁹ Harris, "Women Without Men," 3.

³⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 54; Linden-Ward and Hurd Green, *American Women in the 1960s*, 71.

who did not fit the mold.³¹ In order to uphold cultural norms, in “Women Without Men” Harris also tried to deemphasize the amount of women present in the workforce in 1960.

The articles provide an example of the double standard that operated in regards to marriage and sexuality for men and women of the 1950s and early 60s. Harris made a point of discussing the sex lives of unmarried men but not those of unmarried women, a disparity that reflected the societal standard that men were allowed to have sex outside of marriage while women were not. She posed the question of “what... unattached men do about sex”; however, she did not mention what unmarried women “do about sex,” even though she informed her readers that women were interested in men and marriage for their entire lives.³² Similarly, during WWII, people viewed men’s extramarital affairs as necessary, while they viewed women’s extramarital affairs as tantamount to treason. Later on, Cold War society expected men to have sexual experience before marriage, but expected women to remain virgins. In addition, Cold War society deemed premarital sex acceptable for men under any circumstances, but only acceptable for women if they were in love or engaged to be married.³³ Harris’s comment that men needed to “do something about sex,” while women did not was another of her attempts to promote societal norms.

Harris also discussed men’s and women’s different roles in the search for a spouse, which revealed even more about the double standard at that time. In her articles, Harris adopted the conventional viewpoint that women were the actors in the search for a spouse, while men were much more passive. She devoted several paragraphs in “Women Without Men” to describing the various ways in which women searched for husbands: they changed jobs, moved away from

³¹ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 39.

³² Harris, “Men Without Women,” 3; Harris, “Women Without Men,” 1.

³³ Gatlin, Rochelle. *American Women Since 1945*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1987, 3; May, *Homeward Bound*, 122; Gatlin, *American Women Since 1945*, 55.

home, went to church, played sports, and signed up for political clubs, all in the effort to meet men. She also said that “even strangers assume that a man who goes to a movie or a prize fight alone does so through choice,” although they assumed that women did those things in order to meet men.³⁴ The way in which Harris depicted both men’s and women’s actions in the search for a spouse reflected the cultural norms of the time. These norms often defined women in terms of men, by their status as wives and mothers, but defined men in terms of the work they did. Single women were thus identity-less unless they were married, while men had identity before, during, and after marriage.³⁵

Another way in which Harris displayed the double standard was by listing the physical and psychological benefits of marriage for men, but not discussing the effect of marriage on women’s health. Marriage benefitted men because in marriage, men had someone to take care of them. However, marriage did not benefit women in the same manner; Harris reported that “many married women” sought psychiatric help, but she did not indicate that married men were seeing psychiatrists as well.³⁶ While men thrived in marriage, women were much more likely to sacrifice and suffer. One participant in the Kelly Longitudinal Study, a twenty-year study of white, middle-class, New England married couples that ended in 1954, listed all the sacrifices she had made for her marriage. These included “all... close relationships... personal freedom, what seemed to contribute to [her] personality, financial independence, goals [and] personal achievements.” Historian Elaine Tyler May, who read this woman’s comments, asserted that the woman was rebelling against society’s expectations for women because she felt that these

³⁴ Harris, “Women Without Men,” 3-4; Harris, “Men Without Women,” 2.

³⁵ Brown, Helen Gurley. *Sex and the Single Girl*. New York: B. Geis Associates, 1962, 89.

³⁶ Harris, “Women Without Men,” 3; Harris, “Men Without Women,” 4.

expectations oppressed her.³⁷ In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan argued that “the feminine mystique [made] the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women... It simply [made] certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence... into... a pattern by which all women must live.”³⁸ Marriage, she said, made women more childish by limiting their options in life, as the woman in the study’s options were limited, so that the only culturally-sanctioned path open to them was that of a housewife. In that way, marriage benefitted men both physically and psychologically, while it impeded women’s psychological development.

Harris’s articles demonstrate that by 1960, some women had begun to challenge society’s idea that they needed to be married to be happy. Harris maintained that some men and women consciously decided not to get married, despite social pressure to do so.³⁹ Postwar society placed “an emphasis on the nuclear family at the expense of other relatives and friends, loss of personal freedom, financial independence, ‘goals,’ and ‘personal achievements,’” especially for women.⁴⁰ One reason that unmarried women outnumbered unmarried men when Harris was writing may have been because marriage in the Cold War era placed more stress upon and required more sacrifices from women than men. As shown by the fact that Harris wrote “Women Without Men” before “Men Without Women,” society “considered marriage more important for women” and therefore, people were more curious as to why women would remain single than why men would.⁴¹ At the time Harris was writing, a growing number of women were dissatisfied with their lives as mothers and housewives. One psychiatrist Harris quoted remarked that his single

³⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 34-5.

³⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 43.

³⁹ Harris, “Women Without Men,” 2.

⁴⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 34.

⁴¹ Gatlin, *American Women Since 1945*, 57.

women patients were happier than those who were married.⁴² However, many married women failed to recognize their individual discontent as part of a problem in larger society.⁴³

By providing examples of single women who were happy without men, Harris showed that some women were rejecting society's expectation for women to marry; however, it was not until after Harris published her articles that women began to see these isolated examples as indicative of a larger societal trend. The idea that women could be independent and make decisions regardless of what men thought was not formally introduced until after Harris wrote, but the fact that she cited examples of women who made those types of decisions shows that the ideas were present and gaining popularity by 1960, even if they were not formally articulated yet.⁴⁴ In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan argued that women's magazines of the Cold War era portrayed women as "young and frivolous, almost childlike; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home" and said that "the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man."⁴⁵ However, by 1963, both Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* and Helen Gurley Brown in *Sex and the Single Girl* had argued that women could and should make their own choices, without relying on men. Brown appealed to conventional gender roles and told her single, working class audience that men were almost required for happiness and fulfillment, but marriage was not—a revolutionary claim for 1962. In Brown's view, the women who balanced their love lives with careers and hobbies would be the most fulfilled.⁴⁶ Friedan, in contrast, wrote for suburban housewives, so she discussed marriage and motherhood, but not romance per se. She said that "The only way for a woman... to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by

⁴² Harris, "Women Without Men," 3.

⁴³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 33.

⁴⁴ Linden-Ward and Green, *American Women in the 1960s*, 146.

⁴⁵ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 36.

⁴⁶ Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 86; Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl*, 4, 89.

creative work of her own,” and by finding a job that would challenge her intellectually, in a way that housework did not.⁴⁷ Even though Harris wrote before Brown and Friedan, she provided examples of women’s discontent with married life, such as that of a divorced woman who stated that she was much happier and much more independent than she had been when she was married.⁴⁸ In this way, Harris provided evidence that dissent from the societal standard of marriage as the route to happiness was present before it became popular.

Harris’s articles also allowed readers to see beyond the more prevalent image of contented housewives and unfulfilled single women. Friedan commented that through Harris’s examples of discontented married women and happy single women, “the door of all those pretty suburban houses opened a crack to permit a glimpse of uncounted thousands of American housewives who suffered alone.”⁴⁹ That “crack” eventually widened, and throughout the women’s movement of the 1960s, the “housewives” had new opportunities to change their ways of thinking. Although Harris and many others tried to uphold the societal standards of the early Cold War era, by 1973, polls suggested that many Americans no longer considered marriage the only path to happiness and fulfillment for men or women. At that point, marriage was merely one of several lifestyles from which men and women could choose. In addition, in a 1986 poll, only twenty-six percent of women “cited being a wife and mother as ‘one of the best parts of being a woman.’” The divorce rate in 1978 was double that of 1965—more than double that of 1960, when Harris wrote. By the late 1970s and 80s, then, society in general had become much more accepting of people who chose not to get married.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 344.

⁴⁸ Harris, “Women Without Men,” 3.

⁴⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 25.

⁵⁰ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 314, 337.

Eleanor Harris's two *Look* magazine articles, "Women Without Men" and "Men Without Women," are historically valuable because they give historians insight into Cold War American society's thoughts on marriage, the double standard that was present during that time, and the ways in which attitudes about marriage were changing by 1960. When Harris wrote, society viewed marriage as the only path to happiness and fulfillment for both men and women, but especially for women. Many viewed the state of being single as a problem that needed to be fixed. Some women, however, rebelled against this way of thinking and led full lives without men. They also rejected the societal double standard, which dictated that single women should actively seek out husbands yet remain virgins until marriage. The idea that women could and should make their own decisions became much more widespread after the publication of *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962 and *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, but Harris's articles portrayed discontent among American women prior to that, and thus foreshadowed the women's movement of the 1960s.

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